





# PSALMS AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

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ARCHIMANDRITE  
AIMILIANOS  
OF SIMONOPETRA

# PSALMS AND THE LIFE OF FAITH

Introduction:  
HIS EMINENCE ARCHBISHOP DEMETRIOS OF AMERICA

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## INTRODUCTION

*O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together!* (Psalm 33:4). This joyous invitation of the sweet Psalmist of Israel is one and the same as the purpose of the present volume. It is an invitation to enter into the praise of God, not merely as a movement of one's mouth, but as a habit of one's heart; not only for a moment, but even unto a lifetime.

The Psalms have a unique power. For they are at once thoroughly *human* and utterly *divine*. The entire range of the human experience is voiced in the Book of Psalms; every virtue and weakness, every emotion and passion of our mortal race is explored and expressed in terms both frank and poignant. By the same token, we receive the Psalms as Γραφὴν Θεόπνευστον, «God-breathed Scriptures» (2 Timothy 3:16), inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus an aspect of the divine self-revelation. This means that when one reads a Psalm in faith, one both speaks to God and listens to God simultaneously. Because of their unique universality and power, the Psalms constitute the prayer book *par excellence* of the Church.

Being both truly human and truly divine, the Psalms as a whole form an extraordinary verbal icon of the person of Jesus Christ. In the Psalms we see His Passion predicted, we hear His life of prayer before the Father, we observe His victory over death in types and shadows. In the Psalms the Holy Apostles and Fathers found an abundance of Christological teaching as they struggled to comprehend the incomprehensible act of divine Incarnation. If the Book of Prophet Isaiah can justifiably be called «the Fifth Gospel», the Book of Psalms may with equal fitness be termed the «Sixth» Gospel.

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For these reasons, the Psalms hold special preeminence not only in the realm of theology but also in the liturgical life of Orthodox Christianity. There is no Divine Liturgy, no daily office, no occasional prayer service that does not either include or at least allude to a Psalm or some passage from the Psalms. The Psalms in this book have been chosen precisely because of their importance in Orthodox liturgical praxis. *Seven times a day do I praise You*, declares the Psalmist (Psalm 118:164). In this verse the Church found warrant to design the structure of the entire ecclesiastical day with its sevenfold division into Vespers, Compline, Matins, and Hours (First, Third, Sixth, and Ninth), with a portion of the Psalter recited in each of these services. In the churches, «David is both first and middle and last» (καὶ πρῶτος, καὶ δεύτερος, καὶ τελευταῖος), thunders a panegyric text of the early fourth century A.D., attributed to Saint John Chrysostom. By virtue of such abundant repetition, the spirit and mind of the Psalter remains to this day the spirit and mind of the Church, especially in her liturgical life.

The yearning of the Psalms and the goal of the Christian life can both be expressed in a single word: *union*. Separated from the experience of God's presence, alienated from one another by the passions, and afflicted by divisions within the material and immaterial components of his individual personhood, the human being craves for life-giving union with God and self and all creation. It was precisely a divinely granted experience of mystical union that shapes the ministry and teaching of the author, Elder Aimilianos, former abbot of the Monastery of Simonopetra on Mount Athos, and presently residing, due to illness, at the Patriarchal and Stavropegial Metochion of the Annunciation of the Theotokos at Ormylia, Halkidiki, Greece.

In the pages to follow, an experience awaits the reader that is



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rare and precious: an opportunity to sit in spirit at the feet of a heavenly-illuminated Elder of Holy Orthodoxy, and to learn the ways of life in the Kingdom of God that is ἐντοῦς ὑμῶν, *within you, in your midst* (Luke 17:21). The path to union with God is explained, not by a mere theoretician dependent on the words of others, but by a veteran guide who knows the way firsthand. «It is not for all to theologize», avers Saint Gregory the Theologian (*Oration* 27.3), but only for those who have become «masters of contemplation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body». Such is the author of these meditations.

Throughout this study of the Psalms (as in every writing of Elder Aimilianos) the goal of union is developed in terms of three overarching themes: (i) the yearning for God, leading to restoration of the intimate relationship in divine love; (ii) self-awareness, leading to reintegration of the sin-fractured human personhood; and (iii) utter allegiance to the ecclesial community, in which we experience the foretaste of Christ's reconciliation of all creation in Himself (cf. Colossians 1:20). The emphasis at all times is decidedly *relational*. Throughout the interpretation, the Psalms are handled, therefore, not merely as texts, but as living prayers that are understood rightly only through use in worship before God.

A direct encounter with the ageless traditions of Orthodox spiritual direction – this is what the present book offers. At the same time, the Elder's exposition offers a scholarly course of study in the class of an outstanding teacher, one with a mastery of these ancient Scriptures. Matters of philological concern – conjugations, declensions, syntax, rhetorical devices – are not eschewed as unspiritual or unedifying, but rather are seized upon as opportunities for deeper understanding. The integration of our human faculties, in other words, does not exclude the mind, but

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rather embraces the entirety of our personhood, created in the divine image. *Let all that is within me bless His holy name*, entreats the Psalmist (Psalm 102:1). This «all» comprehends every faculty of the mind, according to the Elder's manner of interpretation. Even the analytical powers of human nature participate in the life of prayer and consequently in the process of union with God.

It is no small matter of personal joy for me to introduce this volume to the reader. I was happy to know both the author, Elder Aimilianos (Vafeidis), and the translator, Father Maximos (Constas), from the time that they were first-year students at Schools of Theology: Elder Aimilianos at the University of Athens, Greece, and Father Maximos at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline, Massachusetts. Since then, they have remained my beloved and esteemed fellow-laborers in Christ. In commending this work to you, I can attest that both the author and the translator are true heralds of the Gospel, «no less by their character than by their preaching», to borrow once more a phrase from Saint Gregory (*Oration* 2.69). I rejoice greatly in beholding the fruits of their inspired labors, by which the Lord indeed is magnified and His holy name exalted.

It is therefore with every archiepiscopal blessing that I present this book to the English-speaking faithful, with a prayer that, through these words, many souls will be united in the praise of God and in the love that is *the bond of perfection* (Colossians 3:14).

† DEMETRIOS  
ARCHBISHOP OF AMERICA

## NOTE ON THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

*Psalms and the Life of Faith* is the third volume in the collected works of Elder Aimilianos, Abbot of Simonopetra (1974-2000), and consists of spiritual and theological interpretations of twelve Biblical Psalms.<sup>1</sup> These interpretations were originally a series of talks given to monastic audiences over a period of nearly ten years. The talks were recorded, later transcribed, and published in Greek in 1999.<sup>2</sup> The present English translation is based on the 1999 text but has also made use of the original recordings in order to attend to nuances of voice and expression. Following the format of the Greek text, the talks are arranged according to the date of their original delivery, and not according to the numbering of psalms in the Psalter. (Information concerning the time and place of original delivery is given at the end of this note.)

For practical reasons, the numbering of the psalms in this translation follows the numbering of the Hebrew Bible, and not the Greek Septuagint (the numbering of which latter is given in parentheses at the head of each chapter). We have, also for practical reasons, aligned most of the Biblical citations with the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible.

1. Elder Aimilianos retired in 2000 and now resides at the Convent of the Annunciation (Ormylia), a dependency of Simonopetra. For an account of Elder Aimilianos' life and work, see the introduction to volume 2 in this series, *The Way of the Spirit* (Athens: Indiktos, 2009), xi-xx.

2. The title of the work in Greek is *Δεῖτε ἀγαλλιασώμεθα τῷ Κυρίῳ* (*O Come, Let us Rejoice in the Lord*), which is the initial verse of Psalm 95.

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In translating the twelve psalms presented in this volume, we have consulted a large number of English translations of the Hebrew and Greek Psalter, from the King James Version of 1611, down through the more recent translations of Robert Alter (2007) and Albert Pietersma (2007). Our use of these translations has been governed by what we believe is the best reading of the psalms (both philologically and ecclesiastically), and by the meaning best suited to the Elder's interpretation and commentary.

Readers expecting a straightforward, modern English translation of the psalms will be disappointed. Even in their original Hebrew, the psalms sounded ancient. When they were translated into Greek (around 285-246 B.C.), they not only preserved their pronounced archaic quality, but took on heightened strangeness as the peculiarities of Hebrew grammar and syntax passed into the language of Plato and Demosthenes. Most modern translations of the psalms attempt to eliminate these difficulties, but we have chosen to preserve them, not simply to suggest something of the Psalter's original "antique coloration" (to use a phrase of Robert Alter's), but to represent what was and remains the peculiar and often difficult language of divine revelation.

The footnotes to the text (which were not part of the Greek edition of 1999) occasionally touch on philological, historical-critical, and archaeological matters relative to the Hebrew and Greek Psalter. Their main purpose, however, is to offer the reader a range of additional interpretive perspectives from the Church Fathers and other ancient ecclesiastical writers. The Fathers commented extensively on the Book of Psalms, perhaps more so than any other book of the Bible, leaving behind a vast and complicated collection of manuscripts. Modern scholarship has at times raised ques-

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tions about the correct attribution of some of these works, but rather than enter into the technicalities of these arguments (for which, in any case, there is no room), we have generally adhered to the traditional attributions.

We gratefully acknowledge the support and professional expertise of Professor George Parsenios of Princeton Theological Seminary, the assistance of Father Theodore Petrides, and the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. John and Carrie Diveris.

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**Chapter 1. Psalm 63**, the first in the collection, is the third of the “Six Psalms” that are read with great solemnity at the beginning of the daily Matins service. Psalm 63 was the focus of a talk given by the elder to the monks of the Monastery of the Transfiguration ( Meteora), on March 9, 1968. The day was the feast of the Holy Forty Martyrs, which that year fell on the first Sunday of Lent, when the Church also celebrates the feast of Saint Gregory Palamas. The main themes under consideration are the soul’s ardent longing for God, the importance of prayer at night, and the centrality of experience in the life of faith.

**Chapter 2. Psalm 17** is read daily at the service of the Third Hour. The psalmist, finding himself in terrible danger, seeks assistance from God for deliverance from his enemies. Pain and suffering, along with their transcendence in the vision of God, are the major focal points of the elder’s interpretation. The date of the original delivery was in the spring of 1969, at the Monastery of the Transfiguration, mentioned above.

**Chapter 3. Psalm 110**, a Messianic psalm, is read at the Ninth Hour of the Great Hours of the feast of the Nativity. The interpretation therefore focuses closely on the meaning of Christ's birth in the flesh, exploring various aspects of the Incarnation, as well as a number of Old Testament types and prophecies. The psalm's interpretation took place during the pre-festal period of the Nativity, on December 20, 1969, at the Monastery of the Transfiguration, Meteora.

**Chapter 4. Psalm 88** is the fourth of the "Six Psalms" mentioned above (chap. 1), and undoubtedly the most despondent in tone of the twelve psalms presented in this book. The elder's commentary is a spiritual exploration of the problem – and potential – of God's absence and the pain and suffering that this causes. This difficult theme calls forth a number of truly striking remarks. In addition, this is the first of several psalms whose titles (or "inscriptions") are discussed in considerable detail. The psalm's interpretation took place on July 1, 1972, at the Monastery of the Transfiguration, Meteora.

**Chapter 5. Psalm 81** was the focus of a talk given by the elder at the Convent of the Holy Theodores (Meteora) on September 12, 1972. Major themes include the worship of ancient Israel and the phenomenon of idolatry, both as a historical event and a spiritual condition. The date of delivery is noteworthy, because in its original setting this psalm was most likely chanted at the Feast of Booths in either September or October.

**Chapter 6. Psalm 90** is read daily during the First Hour, just before the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Called a "Prayer of Moses,"

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the commentary focuses on Moses' relationship with and experience of God. Set against the background of the Exodus narrative, the elder's treatment of the wandering in the desert unfolds into a spiritual meditation on the nature of time and the futility of life without God. In the striking conclusion, the struggle of the ego with God is compared to the wrestling of Jacob with the Lord (Gen 35:25-31), which is a recurring theme in the elder's teaching. This was a talk originally given on February 24, 1973, for the novices at the Convent of the Holy Theodores, Meteora.

**Chapter 7. Psalm 84**, which is read daily at the Ninth Hour, is the *par excellence* psalm of pilgrimage, a theme which is explored from several points of view, but chiefly as the movement of the soul toward union with God. As he does with nearly all the psalms in this book, the elder demonstrates his remarkable gift for illuminating aspects of Biblical history in the light of faith and spirituality. The interpretation of this psalm took place on July 10, 1973, a few months before Elder Aimilianos and his monks left Meteora to repopulate the Monastery of Simonopetra.

**Chapter 8. Psalm 38**, the second of the "Six Psalms," is a psalm of repentance. The nature of sin and the challenge of self-knowledge are discussed in detail, along with the question of physical illness and its underlying spiritual causes. The chapter concludes with yet another signature depiction of the struggle between the self and God (cf. chap. 6). The interpretation of Psalm 38 was given on July 19, 1973, at the Convent of the Holy Theodores (Meteora)

**Chapter 9. Psalm 19** is often cited as a Biblical proof-text for the notion of God's revelation through creation (or "natural theology"), but here a rather different approach is taken. According to

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the elder, Psalm 19 does not so much describe a revelation of God as such, but rather the interior experience of such a revelation in the heart of the psalmist. The law of God, which also figures in the psalm, likewise receives considerable treatment. The elder interpreted this psalm on August 8, 1973, at the Convent of the Holy Theodores (Meteora).

**Chapter 10. Psalm 103** is the fifth among the “Six Psalms.” It is also part of the “Typika” and thus appointed to be chanted during the Divine Liturgy. The psalmist focuses directly on God’s mercy, compassion, and long-suffering. He expresses the joy experienced by the redeemed soul, which is fully conscious both of God’s holiness and its own sinfulness; of God’s Fatherhood and its own status as a child of the Creator. Psalm 103 is above all a hymn of love to God. The date of the original delivery was August 24, 1973, at the Convent of the Holy Theodores (Meteora, Greece).

**Chapter 11. Psalm 118** is a song of festive celebration. From this psalm, only the first thirteen verses (from the total of twenty nine) were interpreted on October 29, 1973, for the community of nuns at New Smyrna, Athens, who had recently arrived there from the Convent of the Holy Theodores. The psalm is a doxological shout of praise, a liturgical dance, and a cry of “alleluia” to the Lord, offered by the soul betrothed to Christ. The mention of the word “affliction” in verse 5 prompts an extended discussion concerning the nature of human suffering and the experience of God.

**Chapter 12. Psalm 77** is read during the Sixth Hour of the Great Hours on the eve of the feast of the Lord’s Baptism (Theophany). The psalm expresses the soul’s pain in response to the the absence of God. The elder discusses both the psalm’s historical background



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and offers his own theological interpretation of the text. He is particularly interested in the soul's personal search for God, which, after much pain and struggle, is granted divine illumination. In majestic language, the psalm describes the "signs and wonders" which accompany God's personal revelation both to the Church and to its individual members. This interpretation of Psalm 77 was originally given on January 15, 1976, at Simonopetra.



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*If you are not able to pray or keep vigil, at least force yourself to study the psalms. The psalms give expression to prayer, repentance, doxology and thanksgiving; they recount feelings and experiences that can give strength even to the weakest soul. When someone passes out you give him a shot of something strong and he revives. That's how it is with the psalms: read them and you too will be revived.*

Elder Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*

*Let us not forget that there is no book more beautiful or more spiritual than the Psalter. For this reason the Fathers often counsel the more simple to say "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." But they encourage the more advanced to read the Psalter, for it is a compendium of all theology and religious experience. The entire life of the Church, the entire tradition of the Church, all of human history, from the creation of Adam and Eve to the Second Coming of Christ, are all contained within the Book of Psalms.*

Elder Aimilianos, *On the Life of St. Neilos*

*The Book of Psalms is not a collection of words. It is not a series of phrases strung together in verses and couplets. Instead, it is a revelation—the very revelatory activity—of God. Every verse is the manifestation of a new image, like a picture projected on a screen, to which successive images are joined, each adding something distinctive but nonetheless an organic part of the larger meaning.*

Elder Aimilianos, *On Psalm 118*

*When one undertakes to examine Scripture in an idle, intellectual way, he creates hatred and quarrelling. Why? Because the intellectual approach to Scripture does not help us to turn and reflect on our sins, but instead makes us focus on problems and concepts related to the study of Scripture, with the result that our logical and intellectual faculties are aroused to no real purpose. "Knowledge" by itself does not add anything. On the contrary, it encourages the cultivation of the individual and his private sense of things; it fosters the self-sufficiency of his personal opinions, which he then seeks to justify and impose on others. This kind of approach to Scripture immediately places you in conflict with others; it opposes your will and opinion to theirs, prompting you to disagree and argue with them, and to make enemies of your brothers. Filled as I am with my own opinions about things, I am not able to receive anything from God.*

*The correct way is to read Scripture with simplicity and to allow God to tell us what He wants to tell us. It's one thing to read Scripture because you want to collect information, and another thing to read it because you want to acquire its true content, that is, the Holy Spirit. This kind of knowledge is the life of God (cf. Jn 17:3), the entry and extension of God into our life; it is God's descent and dwelling among us. We can judge whether or not our study of Scripture is authentic based on the number of tears we shed when we study. To be sure, I can also read Scripture without shedding tears, and without a strong sense of my sins, but with the hope that God's grace, through my reading of Scripture, will break open my hardened heart. Read Scripture, then, but don't forget about your sins and reduce Scripture to an object of intellectual inquiry, for at that point it ceases being the word of God and you start seeing it as something human. The criterion for your study should be this: the way you read the Bible should bring peace to your heart, communion with God, love of neighbors, and the consciousness of your own sinfulness: the recognition of how unworthy and ill-prepared you are to stand before God.*

Elder Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*

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1  
PSALM 63 (LXX 62)

*A psalm of David, when he was in the desert of Judea.*

- 1 O God, my God, to You I rise early at dawn.  
    *My soul has thirsted for You;  
    how often my flesh has longed for You,  
    in a desert land, parched and impenetrable.*
- 2 Thus have I appeared before You in Your sanctuary,  
    *that I might see Your power and Your glory.*
- 3 For Your mercy is better than life itself;  
    *my lips will praise You.*
- 4 Thus I will bless You throughout my life,  
    *and in Your name I will lift up my hands.*
- 5 Let my soul be filled as with marrow and fatness,  
    *and with joyful lips my mouth will praise You.*
- 6 If I remembered You on my bed,  
    *in the early hours of the dawn I meditated on You,*
- 7 For You have become my helper,  
    *and in the shelter of Your wings I will rejoice.*
- 8 My soul clings closely behind You,  
    *Your right hand has upheld me.*
- 9 But as for them, in vain they sought after my soul,  
    *and they shall descend into the lowest parts of the earth.*
- 10 They will be given to the edge of the sword;  
    *they will be served up to the foxes.*
- 11 But the king shall rejoice in God;  
    *all who swear by Him will be praised,  
    for the mouth of those who speak unjustly has been stopped.*

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- 1 *O God, my God, to You I rise early at dawn.  
My soul has thirsted for You;  
how often my flesh has longed for You,  
in a desert land, parched and impenetrable.*

David calls out to God twice, adding in the second instance the possessive pronoun «my». His heart is wholly consumed by the love of God; he can find no rest. He seeks to satisfy his desire by invoking the divine name over and over. Expressing the depth of his relationship with God, he says «O God, *my* God» with the same love and devotion that a small child might say «Mamma, *my* Mamma».

Psalm 63 is a love song, a canticle of desire for God. For the singer of such a song, God is an utterly concrete and compelling reality. And so David speaks to Him, cries to Him, and at the same time searches after Him, as if he were crying out: *Have you seen Him Whom my heart loves?* (cf. Song 3:3). Where is God? Where has He gone? The psalmist is deeply troubled. God had been his friend; he knew Him well and encountered Him often. His only desire was to live with Him always. That's why he cries out to Him, why he calls upon Him so simply and so directly, saying *my God, my God*.

*To You I rise early at dawn.* «Early in the morning I address myself to You; I pray to You».<sup>1</sup> What does it mean to *rise early at dawn*? In the first place, «dawn» (ὄρθρος) was the name given

1. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 63*: «*To You, he says, I rise early at dawn, and send forth my prayers and hymns*» (PG 27:277); and Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 63*: «*This was David's first prayer, which he offered to God early in the morning, at the first hour of the day*» (PG 23:1392). Some modern interpreters classify Psalm 63 as a «psalm of vigil» (along with Psalms 5, 17, 27, 30, 57, 59), associated with the practice of nightly devotions practiced by individuals during private visits to the Temple.

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to the second-to-last shift of the night watch kept by the ancient Israelites.<sup>2</sup> This means that David is speaking to God very late at night, just before the break of day, before the rising of the sun. But David is a king, burdened with the cares of office: shouldn't he be sleeping at such an hour? Of course he should, for sleep is sweet. But is there anything sweeter than prayer, which is an encounter with God?<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew text lends an additional element to this, since the phrase, *to You I rise early at dawn*, also means, «even though it is still night, I search for you with warmth and ardor».

Sleeplessly, therefore, the psalmist seeks God. He can find no rest.<sup>4</sup> He searches for God in the small hours of the night, in the

2. See Exodus 14:24; Numbers 18:3-5; Ezekiel 44:8-16; and 2 Samuel 17:22. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.51: «The 'dawn' is the boundary between night and day, at which time the one is disappearing and the other is beginning. In many passages of Scripture, evil is enigmatically signified by darkness, and the beginning of the life of virtue as the dawn, and so Paul says *the night is far gone, the day is at hand; let us then cast off the works of darkness and walk becomingly as in the day* (Rom 13:12-13)» (trans. R. Heine, 136).

3. See St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Holy Martyrs* 3: «Imagine the darkest of nights, when all men and all living creatures are fast asleep in the midst of the greatest silence, and you alone are awake, speaking freely and openly with God. Is sleep sweet? And yet nothing is sweeter than prayer» (PG 50:711).

4. The soul's intense desire for God overcomes not simply the body's need for sleep but bodily desire itself; compare Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm* 63: «When he says, *to You I rise early at dawn*, he means that 'my desire for You, O God, has driven away sleep, and has raised me up to worship You'» (PG 80:1336B); Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm* 63: «The words, *to You I rise early at dawn* indicate the purity of David's night, for those who defile themselves by immoral behavior at night do not rise before dawn to pray» (PG 23:604B); Didymos of Alexandria, *On the Psalms*: «If one has passed the night committing sins of the flesh, how can he *rise to God early at dawn*? For

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early hours of the morning. And where is David at this time? Is he safe in his palace, attending to the affairs of state, meditating on God throughout the day, and now searching for Him at night? No. He is in the desert, pursued by Absalom, his son. He is being hunted like an animal by a band of conspirators and rebels (cf. 2 Sam 15:1-23).<sup>5</sup> He is hungry, thirsty, stripped of his royal garments, and in peril from desert storms and violent men. And yet he asks neither for deliverance from this desperate situation nor for the punishment of his enemies. He seeks only God.

In the arid desert, David's desire for God flourishes.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, all the things that he might normally have wished for, that he

this phrase does not describe a change of location, since God is not limited by space, but rather a change in the soul's disposition, a change in its relation to God» (ed. E. Mühlenberg, 635); and St. Theodore the Ascetic, *Spiritual Chapters* 94: «Whatever a man loves, he desires at all costs to be near to continuously and uninterruptedly, and he turns himself away from everything that hinders him from being in contact and dwelling with the object of his love. It is clear therefore that he who loves God also desires always to be with Him and to converse with Him. This comes to pass in us through pure prayer. Accordingly, let us apply ourselves to prayer with all our power; for it enables us to become akin to God. Such a man was he who said: *O God, my God, to You I rise early at dawn; my soul has thirsted for You* (Ps 63:1). For the man who cries to God at dawn has withdrawn his intellect from every vice and clearly is wounded by divine love» (*Philokalia* 2:35).

5. Psalm 63 has many lexical features in common with 2 Samuel 15, including the «desert land» (Ps 63:1; 2 Sam 15:23, 28; 16:2); the «parched land» (Ps 63:1; 2 Sam 16:2, 14); the «seeing» of God in the sanctuary (Ps 63:2; 2 Sam 15:25); and the «sword» of retribution (Ps 63:10; 2 Sam 15:14).

6. Compare Evagrius, *On Proverbs* 21:19: «David says, *in a desert land, parched and impenetrable* (Ps 63:1). The 'desert land' is the place of virtue, and this is why the devil can find no rest there, and so *he passes through parched, waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none* (Mt 12:43), for *he is the king of all things that dwell in the waters* (Job 41:26)» (SC 340:227).

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might once have wanted, are now without meaning or purpose. In the depths of the night, he senses that he needs only God and nothing else. He realizes, moreover, that prayers said during the day, if they have no root in prayers said at night, are very weak and suffer, as it were, from lack of nourishment. Take a small sapling with no roots and plant it in the ground. The first storm will quickly knock it down. If, however, it is deeply rooted in the earth, it will survive the violence of the winds and rain. In the same way, our spiritual life must have roots in the night. The life of the Christian begins and is formed in the night, in the vigil of prayer offered to God. Do we interrupt our sleep, rise at night, and raise our hands in prayer to God? If not, our experience of God during the day will be shallow and superficial.<sup>7</sup>

*My soul has thirsted for You.* «Like a parched throat, my soul thirsts for You; my entire being longs for You. I have always thirsted and longed for You». The Hebrew says «My soul, O God, desires You». «It is melting with the thought of You, wasting away, suffering, filled with anguish. Anxiously awaiting you, my soul has melted away».<sup>8</sup>

7. Compare St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 64: «When the good order of the night's discipline is disturbed, then during the labor of the day the intellect also becomes confused; it travels in darkness and it does not take delight in reading, as it is accustomed to do. The delight given to ascetics by day pours forth upon their pure intellect from the light obtained by their night's activity» (*Homilies*, 308).

8. This is the first of three occurrences of the word «soul» in this psalm, each of which marks an increasing intensification of the psalmist's relationship to God: from the soul's passionately *thirsting* for God (v. 1); to its experience of *contentment/satiety* (v. 5); to the soul that *clings* to God, being clasped and surrounded by God's right hand (v. 8), in an intimate community of life with God.

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*How often my flesh has longed for You,  
in a desert land, parched and impenetrable.*

From this it is clear that, not only does David's soul long for God, but also his flesh, which likewise suffers on account of God's absence.<sup>9</sup> *How often*: in other words, «very often, endlessly, without ceasing, my soul and body have sought You. With all my heart and soul, with all my mind and strength, with all my psychological, spiritual and bodily energies I seek after You (cf. Mk 12:30), in a desert land, parched and impenetrable». According to another version of the text, David says «I thirst for You, O God, like a thirsty land, which is parched and impenetrable».

The psalmist compares his spiritual state to that of soil before the start of the rainy season. Such soil is hardened and dry; when furrowed by the plough it breaks into pieces and turns to dust. It needs water. «In the same way, my God, I thirst for you». The Judean Desert, which is David's external, physical landscape, enables him to contemplate the inner desert of his soul.<sup>10</sup> And what is the soul when God is absent from it, if not a barren desert? But thanks to his prayers at night, the psalmist is emboldened to seek a living, personal encounter with God.

In these days of the Great Fast, we chant: «O Giver of Life, open to me the gates of repentance».<sup>11</sup> On what basis do we ask God to do this for us? The hymn itself gives us the answer: «For early at

9. According to Evagrius, *On Psalm 63*: «Not only does David's soul thirst for God, but also his flesh (Ps 63:1), having learned of the hope of its resurrection which is in God» (ΒΕΠΕΣ 80:99).

10. On the spiritual significance of the desert, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 58, 104.

11. A Lenten hymn sung at the Sunday Matins after Psalm 51.

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dawn my spirit rises to Your holy temple». From the depths of the night, my God, I direct my spirit to You. This is what gives us the assurance and the courage to approach God. And so it was in the case of David.

2 *Thus have I appeared before You in Your sanctuary,  
that I might see Your power and Your glory.*

«My God, often have I turned to you, *appearing before you in Your sanctuary, that I might see Your power and Your glory*. Often have I come to this holy place in order to see You. And *how* have I come here? *How* have I appeared? *Thus*. By which he means «like this», that is, «with this same intense desire for You; with this same powerful longing have I come here so often and presented myself to You, *to see Your power and Your glory*». <sup>12</sup> «Power» and «glory» are two words with overlapping meanings: God's glorious power and His powerful – indeed, all-powerful – glory. David says «Your *power*», for he had experienced God's power many times in the past, and now he feels the need of it acutely. The «glory» mentioned here is the manifestation of God's awesome presence (cf. Ex 16:10; Num 16:19).

*That I might see Your power and Your glory*: «That I might behold You in prayer and contemplation, that I might see Your *pillar of cloud* (Ex 13:21-22), Your *thick darkness* (Dt 4:11), and whatever else You make Your dwelling place. *That I might see* whatever it is that reveals You to me, which is the uncreated activity of Your essence by means of which I perceive that You, my God, exist».

12. Compare St. John of Karpathos, *To the Monks in India* 44: «*Thus have I appeared before You in Your sanctuary* – the sanctuary of my thoughts – *that I might see Your power and Your glory* (Ps 63:2), for they are my salvation» (*Philokalia* 1:308).

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To see, to taste, to savor and take delight in, to be filled with *Your glory*. The prophet seeks a vision. Simply speaking to God does not satisfy him. He wants to *see* Him.

And how will such a vision come about? By appearing *before You in Your sanctuary*. Not in the Tent of Meeting, not in the Temple, but in the *sanctuary*, a word with particular significance. As the «Holy Place», the sanctuary is that which is separate and separated from all. It is a place set aside exclusively for religious purposes and dedicated permanently to God. Thus the holy chalice, the holy paten, their holy coverings, as well as the holy table, are likewise set aside strictly for devotional use. They are «useless» with respect to other functions or activities. They exist solely and exclusively for the service of God, and so they are holy, and wholly set apart.

«O Lord, it is only when our hearts have been separated from the world that we can communicate with You, entering into the divine darkness of Your presence». For the Eternal One does not mingle with the transitory things of time. God is inaccessible to all, yet accessible to the soul, giving Himself to those who turn to Him with their whole heart, and who have the kind of spirit expressed in the following verse.

3 *For Your mercy is better than life itself;  
my lips will praise You.*

David realizes that God's mercy is better than *life itself*, better than «many lives»,<sup>13</sup> and better than any particular kind of life. One person believes that his purpose in life is to serve God. Another believes that money, power, influence, and pleasure are the things that

13. The Septuagint uses the plural form: «Your mercy is better than (many) lives».



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give meaning to human existence. From another point of view, the phrase *better than life itself* also means «better than a *long* life». Let us suppose that our life span could be extended once, twice, or a thousand times beyond its natural limits. Even then, God's *mercy* would be above and beyond all the good things of life, above and beyond anything I could hope to gain or accomplish in a thousand years, beyond anything available to me in the entire world.<sup>14</sup> *Your mercy*, O God, is beyond compare. «Mercy» is another word for God's love. It is that particular quality or activity of God that makes it possible for us to be united with Him, to communicate with Him. It is God's love and mercy alone that enable us to draw near to Him, not our righteousness or our virtues.

«*Your mercy*, O Lord; this experience of communion with You, this union with You, is sufficient for me. Beyond all the good things of this world, beyond thousands of lives and endless lifetimes, You my God are the One Whom I love. *My lips will praise You* for that is the purpose of my life». Instead of saying «my mouth» will praise You, he says *my lips*, substituting the part for the whole. «*My lips* will praise You, exalt You, glorify you, magnify You. I live to praise You, to worship You, to extol You throughout my life. And if I should die here in this barren desert, where unjust men are seeking to kill me, it would be of no importance. It is enough for me to be with You. Above and beyond my life I have You, my God. My only desire is to praise You». These thoughts carry David further, and lead him to make a promise to God, which appears in the next verse.

4 *Thus I will bless You throughout my life,  
and in Your name I will lift up my hands.*

14. See below, Psalm 90:11 (chap. 6).

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Thus, in other words, «in this manner», that is, with all my strength, filled with desire and longing for You, *I will bless You throughout my life*. «The meaning of my life is found in the act of blessing You, in glorifying You. Apart from that, it would be as if I did not exist, as if I were not even alive. My life has meaning only to the extent that it revolves around You; to the extent that I magnify and glorify You». Let us consider the etymology of the verb «to bless», which in Greek means to «utter a good word».<sup>15</sup> God is truly glorified when we enter into communion with His Word, when we are united to His Word, when our life becomes Word-like and Christ-like. There is no better way for us to «bless» God. Thus *in Your name I will lift up my hands*. «To You I will pray; to You I will address myself. I will have no other God; I will set up no idols within my heart (cf. Ezek 14:3). I will have no alien thoughts or desires, for my whole mind and life will be turned toward You and You alone. My hands are lifted up to You like two lamps of fire, the flames of which rise up to heaven». What an extraordinary image the psalmist offers to us, and yet one which is well known.<sup>16</sup> In place of a sacrifice, he offers the *lifting up of his hands as an evening sacrifice* (cf. Ps 141:2). «My act of blessing, indeed my entire life, becomes a sacrifice to God». This is how our hearts should be!

15. In Greek, the verb «to bless» (*εὐλογεῖν*), is composed of a prefix meaning «good» or «well» (*εὖ-*) and the noun «word» or «speech» (*λόγος*).

16. Well known, that is, because the verse from Psalm 141, mentioned in the next sentence, is chanted daily at every Orthodox Vesper service. See also the story of Abba Joseph from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: «Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, ‘Abba, as far as I can, I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace, and as far as I can I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?’ Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands toward heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, ‘If you will, you can become all flame’» (trans. B. Ward, 103).

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5 *Let my soul be filled as with marrow and fatness,  
and with joyful lips my mouth will praise You.*

*As with marrow and fatness* – what a wonderful image!<sup>17</sup> «Just as a hungry man might grab a piece of rich, fatty meat and devour it, as if there were nothing else in the world that could satisfy his appetite, so too do I hunger for You, my God. And this hunger itself fills me with pleasure». *With joyful lips my mouth will praise You*, or «my mouth will praise Your name», according to another version of the text. «My lips, jubilant with happiness, will praise Your name». There is no other way for the soul to rejoice, or to know happiness. God fills our life with joy, and makes our soul rejoice.<sup>18</sup> So intensely does David feel this communion with God that he declares:

17. The soul's desire is now satisfied in an image derived from a cultic meal in the Temple, which further resonates with Exodus 24:9-11, where the vision of God is also associated with a meal. «Marrow» and «fatness» are choice cuts of meat in a time when meat was a rare commodity in the diet of most people, and thus regarded as something especially precious and satisfying. The «fat» of the meat is primarily the part of the sacrifice that belongs to God (Lev 7:23, 25). Origen, *On Leviticus* 5.4, associates the removal of sacrificial fat, which is taken «from above the breast» (Lev 7:30), with the removal of «evil thoughts» from the heart, which is thus «purified and able to see God» (cf. Mt 5:8) (FOTC 83:112-113).

18. Compare St. Makarios of Egypt, *On Prayer*: «What does it mean that the *kingdom of God is within you* (Lk 17:21) except that the heavenly gladness of the Spirit is clearly stamped on the virtuous soul? For already in this life, the virtuous soul receives a foretaste and a prelude of the delight, joy, and spiritual gladness that the saints will enjoy in the eternal light of Christ's kingdom. Passages in the Psalms hint at this active gladness and consolation of the Spirit, when they say *my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God* (Ps 85:2), and *my soul will be filled as with marrow and fatness* (Ps 63:5)» (*Philokalia* 3:292).

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6 *If I remembered You on my bed,  
in the early hours of the dawn I meditated on You.*

«Lord, *if I remembered You at night, on my bed*, my thoughts were occupied with You until *the early hours of the dawn*. My spirit *meditated on You*». <sup>19</sup> This verse is directly linked with the one that follows.

7 *For You have become my helper,  
and in the shelter of Your wings I will rejoice.*

«I took no thought for sleep. Throughout the watches of the night, I meditated on You. I prayed to You, my Lord and my God, because *You are my helper* (cf. Ps 40:17), *and in the shelter of Your wings I will rejoice*». Altogether, he is saying: «My God, I think of You always; I have remembered You even upon my bed. I meditate on You *in the early hours, for You have become my helper*». The Hebrew says: «I dwelled in You throughout the watches of the night». <sup>20</sup>

*For You have become my helper*. Here David uses the past tense in order to express the certainty, the definitive character, of his experience of God. It is a terrible thing for a person not to have experiences of God's presence. How can one live without them? The psalmist derives strength from his experience and so speaks

19. See St. John Chrysostom, *On Hebrews* 14.4: «*I remembered You on my bed* (Ps 63:6). We must always remember God, and especially when our mind is tranquil. If we call God to mind during the day, cares will come rushing in, along with the distractions and the noise of the day, and so the recollection of God is more effective at night, when the soul is tranquil and at rest» (PG 63:115).

20. See below, Psalm 90:1 (chap. 6).

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to God. We too are able to have such experiences. If someone says that he cannot have such experiences, what he is really saying is that he does not want to have them. But those who love God are filled with –that is, they *know* and *experience*– God’s divine power and grace. Here we think of the many hymns that praise God for His active presence in the saints: «Glory to Him Who gave you strength; glory to Him Who crowned you; glory to Him Who through you works miracles». It is God Who strengthens us, crowns us, fills our lives with miracles, and glorifies us. And since it is God Who works miracles (cf. Pss 77:14; 86:10), we can all draw upon His strength in order to acquire experiences of God. These are personal, inner experiences, available to all, for *God does not favor some more than others* (cf. Rom 2:11; Gal 2:6; Eph 6:9).

*And in the shelter of Your wings I will rejoice.* «My God, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings (cf. Lk 13:34), gather me up and cover me in Your love, in Your tenderness, and in Your compassion (cf. Dt 32:11). Why should I be distressed? Why should I be anxious? Why should I be troubled by negative thoughts? It is enough for me to have a heart that feels Your presence and loves You. And then *I will rejoice*; then my entire life will be a continual rejoicing». Previously the psalmist had *joyful lips*, but now he *rejoices*. Joy is the refrain of the true Christian. He revels in it, for the recollection of the past reminds him that God has never abandoned him. And here we find a valuable lesson. We too should call to mind God’s mercies, which are without number, and bestowed equally and abundantly on all, and not least on the sick, the suffering, the poor, and all those that seem insignificant in the eyes of the world. The recollection of God’s mercy is a source of hope and strength.<sup>21</sup> How, then, can the psalmist not cry out:

21. See below, Psalm 103:2 (chap. 10).

8 *My soul clings closely behind You,  
Your right hand has upheld me.*

Now the mutual feelings of tenderness and love, along with the power of union, reach their culmination in a sweetness and a delicacy that is like the gentle breath of a mild breeze or the fragrance of perfume. *My soul clings closely behind You.* «I am attached to You, my God. I follow You. I never want to be separated or apart from You». This is the expression of a common life lived together over a long period of time, an expression of unity, identity, and mutual assimilation.<sup>22</sup> «You and I, together forever, so closely united that we could never live apart from each other, for we are one. My «I» has been submerged and lost in the boundless depths of You. And this is because *Your right hand has upheld me.* Your power and Your grace continually help me».<sup>23</sup> For our spiritual

22. Compare St. Diadochos of Photiki, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 16: «The righteous, who are still in the process of being purified, are characterized both by fear and a moderate measure of love; perfect love, on the other hand, is found only in those who have already been purified and in whom there is no longer any thought of fear, but rather a constant burning and clinging of the soul to God through the energy of the Holy Spirit. As it is written, *my soul clings closely behind You, Your right hand has upheld me* (Ps 63:8)» (*Philokalia* 1:257); St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, *On Prayer* 2: «The soul dominated by divine eros cannot turn back, for as David says, *my soul clings closely behind You* (Ps 63:8)» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:298); id., *On the Contemplative Life*: «Blessed are they who, with all the power of their soul and with all spiritual knowledge, are raised up to visions and contemplations of God . . . for they *cling* with ardent desire *closely behind God* (Ps 63:9), and are overcome by unbearable longing, for they contemplate the inexpressible beauty of the divine face» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 5:55).

23. The words «behind» and «right hand» in Psalm 63:8 are paralleled in Exodus 33:20-33, where God covers Moses with His hand, which He then

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lives to bear fruit, two things are necessary: the exercise of our free will, which is expressed in the first part of this verse, and divine grace, which is expressed in the second.

Think of a small child who with great tenderness and affection loves his father. He takes hold of his hand, embraces him, clings to him, just as the father loves and holds the child. Let us also call to mind the icon of the *Glykophilousa*, in which the Theotokos is depicted holding the child Jesus with infinite tenderness. The two of them are caught up in a reciprocal embrace so that their bodies appear to merge and form a single body; their cheeks pressed against each other as if to form a single face, a single person. That, my beloved, is the exercise of free will.<sup>24</sup>

David says nothing here about the need for strength or human struggle. His inner disposition is simple, namely, not to be separated from God: *my soul clings closely behind You*. The strength necessary for such a union comes directly from God, which is why he says *Your right hand has upheld me*, which means «Your grace upholds me: working together, my free will and Your grace can ac-

withdraws, allowing Moses to see His back; cf. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 2.250: «When David heard and understood this (i.e., that Moses was «covered by the hand of God»), he said, concerning himself, *my soul clings closely behind You, Your right hand has upheld me*. Here you see how Psalms agrees with Exodus. For the one says that the *right hand upholds* the person who has joined himself *closely behind* God, and the other that *the hand touches him* who waits in the rock for the divine voice and prays that he might *follow closely behind* it (Ex 33:20-33)» (trans. A. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 119); and Evagrius, *On Psalm* 62: «*My soul clings closely behind You*: to be 'behind' God is to be with God, as Moses teaches, having seen the *back parts of God* (Ex 33:20-23)» (ΒΕΠΙΕΣ 80:100).

24. In addition to these images of parental love and concern, the Hebrew verb «to cling closely» (or «to hold fast to») also occurs in Genesis 2:24, where it describes the intimate community of life between husband and wife.

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comply with all things». Saint Athanasios of Alexandria understands this verse as follows: «Not even for a moment, my God, can my spirit be separated from You, for I am afire with ardent love, and, as if my mind were a mass of glue, I adhere to You in desire». <sup>25</sup> It is the movement of our free will, of our desire, which attracts and draws down divine grace.

The Holy Forty Martyrs, whose memory we celebrate today, said: «We have one honor and one life; and there is one gift, one grace, and one assurance: to die for the sake of Christ». Why did they believe that dying for the sake of Christ was an «assurance»? Because Christ assures them of an eternal dwelling place with God, and this is why they said: «Let our feet freeze here, so that they may dance in paradise. Let our hands now tremble and shake, so that we might raise them boldly in supplication before God. Let us cast aside our garments so that, stripped naked like Christ, we might be clothed in His grace. Let us offer our bodies as a sacrifice for the love of Christ». <sup>26</sup>

Today is also the Second Sunday of Lent, when we celebrate the memory of Saint Gregory Palamas. He was the son of a Byzantine nobleman, but renounced the world and became a monk, persuading his mother, siblings, and servants also to be tonsured

25. On Psalm 63 (PG 27:280). The image of the «mass of glue» (οἶον τιμὴν κόλλη) τῇ ψυχῇ) resonates with the phrase «my soul clings (ἐκολλήθη) closely behind You».

26. The Forty Martyrs of Sebasteia were a group of Christian soldiers sentenced to death under the Roman Emperor Licinius (who was himself executed in 325). Angered at their refusal to worship the gods of Rome, Licinius ordered that they be stripped of their clothing and left naked on a frozen lake where they perished from the cold. The martyrs' last words, cited above by the elder, are taken from the hymns of the vesper service (9 March).



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and enter monasteries and convents.<sup>27</sup> Every day he drank only a little water and ate only a little bread. He avoided sleep as much as he could, because it robbed him of precious hours for prayer, which for him was communion with God. For a three-month period, he slept only for a short interval around mid-day, after consuming a small amount of bread.<sup>28</sup> He was a «heavenly man and an earthly angel».<sup>29</sup> For five days of the week he remained secluded in his cell, leaving it only on Saturdays and Sundays in order to attend the Divine Liturgy.<sup>30</sup> There he sought the face of God, an experience essential for his assimilation to the divine, for his growth in likeness to God. Like the psalmist, his constant wish was to be with God, to be united with Him. As he was dying, he appeared to be speaking, although his voice was little more than a whisper. One of his disciples drew near and heard him say the following words: «The things of heaven are destined for heaven». And this he repeated, his biographer tells us, in a rhythmic fashion until the moment when his «heavenly soul was released from its natural union with the earth, and joined the company of the angels, with whom he had long consorted».<sup>31</sup> Saint Gregory could not imagine himself to be merely a creature of the earth, because all his thoughts, his heart, his desires, and his whole being were of

27. St. Philotheos Kokkinos, *The Life of St. Gregory Palamas* 3; 14 (ed. D. Tsamis, 429, 441).

28. Ibid., 21 (449).

29. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *Sermon on Repentance*: «The Apostle Paul is a citizen of heaven, yet he is clothed in humble attire. He is a heavenly man and an earthly angel. Gladly do I spend my time reading his Epistles, contemplating the beauty of his virtues» (PG 49:291).

30. *Life of St. Gregory Palamas* 26 (454).

31. Ibid., 115 (563).

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heaven. He was completely united with God. «Grant that I may see You, my God; that I may be filled with You, delight in You, and be united with You». Moved by the same desire, the exiled and persecuted psalmist continues with assurance:

9 *But as for them, in vain they sought after my soul,  
and they shall descend into the lowest parts of the earth.*

10 *They will be given to the edge of the sword;  
they will be served up to the foxes.*

«Those who pursue me are not my enemies, my God, but Yours. And thus it is *in vain* that they seek to kill me. In the end, it is they who will *descend into the lowest parts of the earth*, and *be given to the edge of the sword*». The Septuagint says *they will be given over to the «hand» of the sword*, which is a personification of death in the form of a lethal weapon. *They will be served up to the foxes*, or, in the Hebrew: «they will provide nourishment for the jackals».<sup>32</sup>

11 *But the king shall rejoice in God;  
all who swear by him will be praised,  
for the mouth of those who speak unjustly has been stopped.*

«But as for me, my God, my life will be filled with rejoicing. I will take delight in You, my God. You will be the cause and the pur-

32. For a corpse to remain unburied, to be consumed by scavengers, is an ultimate curse in Biblical literature, as it was among the ancient Greeks. The psalmist's desire for revenge against his enemies constitutes a provocative contrast to the images of longing and intimacy of the rest of the psalm, and captures the political violence in which this psalm was born.

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pose of my joy». *All who swear by him will be praised.* «All those who are loyal to You, O God, who are devoted and consecrated to You, will be praised and glorified. But those who speak *unjustly* will live to see their mouths closed. They will be silenced».

\*

\*   \*

Here you have a brief interpretation of Psalm 63. The psalm's primary message is communion with God, which is to be valued more *than life itself* (v. 3). Do we see God? Do we long for God? How does one draw near to the mystery of God? By means of the following steps and stages that are described in the psalm. The first is nocturnal prayer and the ardent search for God, which we saw in the first verse. When I realize that, without God, I am truly a barren desert; when I feel my inner desolation and the suffering of my flesh, then I will seek God «in the night». We cannot say that we have a spiritual life if we do not rise at night to pray.

The second stage, which appears in the second verse, involves the separation of the heart and the mind from all that is within us and around us. For us there exists only one center of gravity, only one point on the horizon; one object alone is within our view, and this is God. Yet how many thoughts are crowded together in our minds and hearts! Upon how many objects do our eyes fasten! Perhaps we're afraid that our life will become narrow and suffocating if our focus is restricted to one thing alone, and so we rush around desperately looking for something to satisfy us. We desire many things. We accumulate things compulsively; we spend our life collecting and hoarding things, as if we were the proprietors of a cheap junk shop. When I see people whose hearts and minds are distracted by worldly things – and I see this within myself as well – I think: small-

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time proprietors! We have become like petty, small-time proprietors! We waste our time gathering second-hand, discarded objects; we amass things with absolutely no value whatsoever. And so I will renounce everything, become a stranger to all things in heaven and on earth, for *what have I in heaven? And besides You, O God, what have I desired upon the earth?* (Ps 73:25). In order for my heart to be pure, it must be completely liberated from all earthly attachments, and then I shall know what Christ means when he says, *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5:8).

The third stage emerges from the fourth verse. To the extent that we separate ourselves from the world – so that God becomes the focus of our life and the meaning of our existence – all our strength and all our energies will be placed in His service.

The fourth stage, described in the sixth verse, is particularly important, involving, as it does, the ceaseless recollection of God and all His benefits. *I remembered You on my bed*. If we do not continually remember God, even upon our beds, there can be no union with Him. *I remembered God and was gladdened* (Ps 77:3). And let us also call to mind the words: *Do this in remembrance of me* (Lk 22:19), which the Lord said when he established the Mystical Supper, the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, which is both a memorial of, and communion with, Christ. Remembrance is thus a form of union, and there can be no union without remembrance. It is therefore essential to remember God, to hold God within memory, for memory fuels desire, and it is by means of desire that God becomes our possession. And thus we become «Words» of God, just as the Word of God became man. The memory of God should be constant, perpetual, ceaseless.<sup>33</sup>

33. Compare St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 27.4: «We should remember God more often than we breath» (trans. L. Wickham & F. Williams,

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The fifth stage flows from the seventh verse. In light of the comments we made above, we understand how necessary it is for us to have experiences of God's grace and His presence.

The sixth stage, which is the grace of God, appears in the eighth verse. We must realize the following truth: in order to begin to live a spiritual life, I must be vividly conscious of the fact that I am nothing, that I can do nothing, and that I am completely incapable and unworthy. It is only the *right hand* of the Most High, only God's grace and power that can produce fruit in my spiritual life. Here we think of the words of Saint Symeon the New Theologian: «It is only when I lament and despair that He shows Himself and He looks at me, He who contemplates all creatures»,<sup>34</sup> When I have accepted the fact that I can do nothing, when all seems lost, then God visits me, and it is then that I see Him. And what is the result? Life becomes a vision, a delight, and a fulfillment. In the words of the Divine Liturgy of Saint Basil: «We have been filled with Your life that knows no end. We have feasted gladly on your inexhaustible nourishment». We are filled with life eternal. We feast on the food of heaven. But this food is not available to people who think that they are something, or that they can accomplish things without God. God cannot commune with people who think like that. Why? Because communion with God is contemplation, a vision of God, given to us by God himself. It is with

219); and St. Basil, Letter 2 (to St. Gregory the Theologian): «Prayer is good and beneficial, for it engenders in the soul a distinct conception of God. And the indwelling of God within us is this: to hold God firmly within the intellect by means of memory and recollection» (LCL 1:17). See also Elder Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*: «A man is judged to be a true monk not simply by embracing poverty, but by becoming a man who ceaselessly hungers for the recollection and remembrance of God» (423).

34. St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymn* 16 (SC 174:10).

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this in mind that Saint John Chrysostom prays in his Divine Liturgy: «Fill our hearts which joy and gladness, O You Who fulfilled the entire plan of the Father». And Sacred Scripture says *rejoice in your youth* (Ecc 11:9); and *gladness of the heart is the life of man* (Sir 30:22). But the world understands these things differently.

God is the one who gives us joy, and we should ascribe all our joy to Him. But what about those times when my life is not joyful? In a word, I am miserable. We should pity the man who does not feel this joy and this celebration. He loves only the earth. He is in love with rubbish and dung (cf. Phil 3:8). He gives God his debris, and when our heart produces only rubbish, it receives very much the same in return from God. The soul that thirsts for God, on the other hand, is continually bathed in divine light. The face of such a person becomes divinely luminous. You see him and you ask yourself, could this man be Christ? Thus the Christian becomes a strange spectacle: a Christ-bearer, a God-bearer, and a Spirit-bearer. He or she reveals the unsurpassable beauty of Christ. And when Christ suddenly appears, resplendent in all His beauty, He fills me with joy, gladness, and sweetness: «Sudden is the change, and strange the transformation, for that which is accomplished within me can not be expressed in words», according to Saint Symeon.<sup>35</sup> Something strange takes place within us, something which cannot be grasped by human thought. And how could it be otherwise? For our «desire for God transcends our desire for the world, and thus it cannot be satisfied by anything in the world».<sup>36</sup>

My desire is for Christ; my longing is for Christ. It is for Him that my life is being transformed. «It is on account of Him that my

35. Id., *Hymn* 8 (SC 156:220).

36. Id., *Hymn* 16 (SC 156:10).

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heart has been wounded (cf. Song 2:5). It is because of Him that my mind has been set afire and groans: I wander and am on fire, searching here and there for You». My path is one of constantly seeking after the Lord. «And I strain my eyes to catch a glimpse of the One I desire, but He is invisible, and evades my sight». But eventually He rewards my efforts, and, as Saint Symeon says, «I am amazed at the beauty of His form... From every direction He shines upon me the light of His immortal splendor. All of my members are shining with light; I am entirely caught up in His glory, and He embraces me totally. He gives Himself to me, the unworthy one, and I am filled with His love and His beauty. I am sated with divine delight and sweetness. I share in His light, I participate also in His glory, and my face shines just like the face of my beloved Christ, and my entire body becomes luminous. Then finally I become more beautiful than those who are beautiful, wealthier than those who are wealthy, more powerful than mighty kings, and more precious than anything on earth or in heaven, for I possess the Creator of the universe, to Whom belongs all glory and honor now and forever. Amen».<sup>37</sup>

This is how a man of God lives. He seeks God, just like that man who, ordained to linger amid shadows, concentrated all his attention within himself, and with his heart on fire cried out: «My God, my God, let me see You just this once, in return for which I will give You one of my eyes». And at that moment heaven opened, and the Lord appeared in all His brilliance, all His majesty, all His glory, and all His love. What a breathtaking and brilliant sight! Nothing could possibly be more beautiful. The man was stunned, entranced, ravished. He could desire nothing greater than this. In desperation he cried out: «Take my other eye and let me see You

37. Ibid. (SC 156:13).

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one more time!» He sees Him again. He exults in the vision. He is filled. But he has lost his sight, like the Apostle Paul after the Lord appeared to him in a blinding light (Acts 9:3-9). Yet the eyes of his soul are wide open and they see with brilliant clarity. His heart is trembling with anticipation and desire, and again he cries out: «O my Christ, let me see You just once more, and then You can take me. Just one more time, and then let me die».



2  
Psalm 17 (LXX 16)

*A prayer of David.*

- 1 *Hearken, O Lord, unto my righteousness,  
attend to my supplication.  
Give ear to my prayer,  
which does not come from deceitful lips.*
- 2 *From before Your face let my judgment come forth;  
let my eyes behold uprightness.*
- 3 *You have tested my heart,  
You have visited me in the night;  
You have tried me by fire,  
and no injustice was found in me.*
- 4 *That my mouth might not speak of the works of men,  
for the sake of the words of Your lips,  
I have kept ways that are hard.*
- 5 *Direct my footsteps in Your paths,  
that my steps may not be shaken.*
- 6 *I have cried, for You have hearkened unto me, O God.  
Incline Your ear unto me, and hearken unto my words.*
- 7 *Wondrously show Your mercies, O You Who save those that  
hope in You from them that have resisted Your right hand.*
- 8 *Guard me, O Lord, as the pupil of the eye.  
In the shelter of Your wings You will shelter me*
- 9 *From the face of the ungodly who have oppressed me.  
My enemies have surrounded my soul,*
- 10 *They have enclosed themselves with their own fat,  
their mouth has spoken arrogance.*

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- 11 *Having cast me out they now encircle me,  
they have set their eyes to look askance on the earth.*
- 12 *They have seized me like a lion eager for his prey,  
like a lion's whelp that lurks in secret places.*
- 13 *Arise, O Lord, overtake them and trip their heels;  
deliver my soul from ungodly men,  
draw Your sword against the enemies of Your hand.*
- 14 *O Lord, from the few separate them from the earth in their life,  
though with Your hidden treasures their belly has been filled.  
They are satisfied with sons,  
and have left the remnants to their children.*
- 15 *But as for me, I will appear before Your face in righteousness;  
I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me.*

\*

\* \*

Psalm 17 is called simply «a prayer of David».<sup>1</sup> As these words suggest, the best way to approach and understand David, the great prophet of God, is to consider him from the perspective of prayer. We need to see him not simply as a historical figure from the Bible, but as a saint engaged in the work prayer. Who could deny that David lived his life kneeling in prayer before God? And, as we shall see, Psalm 17 is an especially ardent prayer. It seems very likely that David wrote it during a time of tremendous stress,

1. This is one of several times in which «prayer» (*tefilah*) is used instead of the anticipated «psalm» (*mizmor*), although the distinction is not always clear, and many psalms combine aspects of both. Most of the psalms are called *mizorim*, and yet in the Jewish tradition the Book of Psalms as a whole has always been called *Tehilim* («Praises»).

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perhaps when he was being pursued by Saul, and hiding in the wilderness of Maon (cf. 1 Sam 23:24-25). Thus it is *from the depths* (Ps 130:1), and with great pain, that David sends forth the cry that we hear in the first verse:

1 *Hearken, O Lord, unto my righteousness,  
attend to my supplication.  
Give ear to my prayer,  
which does not come from deceitful lips.*

*Hearken, O Lord, unto my righteousness.* In the first line, righteousness is personified. The psalmist's sense of justice, his virtue, and his faithfulness to the will of God, cry out and compel God to listen. It's as if he were saying: «Listen to my righteousness, O Lord, and hear my just demand». David believes that what he seeks from God is something that God Himself desires, namely, righteousness.<sup>2</sup>

*Attend to my supplication.* This means «pay attention to my prayer», or as the Hebrew says, «pay attention to my cry», to my sharp, piercing cry.

*Give ear to my prayer, which does not come from deceitful lips.* «Receive into Your ears, O Lord, my petition; *hear my prayer*» (Ps 143:1). David is saying: «I am able to speak to you boldly, O God, since the lips that address You do not lie». Do you see how important it is for us to have a clear conscience?

Here the word «righteousness» reveals the purity of David's conscience. His heart is pure; there is nothing within him that he

2. Note that in Greek there is no distinction, as there is in English, between the words «righteousness» and «justice», both of which are rendered by a single word (i.e., *δικαιοσύνη*).

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would be ashamed of revealing to God. With the words, *which does not come from deceitful lips*, the psalmist expresses his commitment to the truth, which is itself an example of justice in action, an expression of his concrete practice of righteousness.<sup>3</sup> Finding himself in dire circumstances, David speaks with all the boldness that his exemplary life affords him, an inner conviction which is not brash or egotistical, but rather the voice of a clear conscience, just as Saint Paul declared: *To this day I have conducted myself before God with a perfectly clear conscience* (Acts 23:1). In his own way, David is saying very much the same thing. We too should strive to live like this, so that we may have boldness of speech before God.

Yet David does not ask God to deliver him from the difficult situation in which he finds himself. In the depths of his being he feels another, greater need, about which he speaks in the following verse.

*2 From before Your face let my judgment come forth;  
let my eyes behold uprightness.*

This verse has two meanings, and each contains measureless depths. When David says, *from before Your face let my judgment come forth*, he means: «From You Yourself, O God, from You personally, let justice be rendered. Just judgment can come only from You. I do not wait for it to be issued by *the rulers of this world or by the sons of men* (cf. Ps 146:3). Neither do I expect it to come about

3. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 17*: «David asks that through his prayer God might hear, not his voice or his words, but the virtue within his soul, which cries out, as it were, through its righteous deeds and so beseeches the hearing of God» (PG 23:160B).

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as the result of my own efforts, or from my struggles, my prayer, or my virtue. On the contrary, *all of my righteousness is but a filthy rag* before You (cf. Is 64:6). By myself I have nowhere to stand, nothing to hold on to, and thus I turn to You, O Lord, to Your face, for refuge and support. May justice and just judgment come forth from Your face». He says «face» but by means of the part he signifies the whole: «May just judgment come directly from You Yourself, my God, and from You alone».<sup>4</sup>

Before considering the second meaning, let us reflect for a moment on what David means by the «face» of God. When someone is either friendly or hostile to us, those feelings are visible on his face. Such a face may be bright and cheerful, or somber and severe. And thus David is saying: «May Your face, O God, always appear joyful to me, and may I hear with my own ears the just judgment of Your mouth; may I see it with my own eyes» (again, the parts are used to express the whole). How much is revealed in a person's glance! A penetrating glance may signal indignation and condemnation. But it may also be the sign of salvation. Thus, says the psalmist, «let Your face, and Your lips, and Your eyes, reveal to me that I have been saved, redeemed».

However, David is not, as we said, asking to be saved from a difficult personal situation. He is asking to see the face of God. Throughout the Book of Psalms, the psalmists seek to behold the face of God.<sup>5</sup> It is the face of God that calls forth the poet's quest,

4. Compare Origen, *On Psalm 17*: «If God has *given all judgment to the Son* (Jn 5:22), then it is from His 'face,' that is, from His person, that all judgment will come, for the Son is the 'Image' of the invisible God (Col 1:15)» (PG 12:1217A); and St. Athanasios of Alexandria (PG 27:105), who offers the same interpretation.

5. Some examples include: «Shine upon us the light of Your face» (Ps 4:6); «You will fill me with gladness along with Your face» (Ps 16:11); «This is

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his pain, his agony. All of his pleading can be summed up and expressed in a single verse: *Make Your face to shine upon Your servant* (cf. Pss 31:16; 80:3). This is the first meaning of the verse.

In the second, David says *let my eyes behold uprightness*. «Uprightness» here means righteous actions, as if he were saying: «Let my eyes see Your upright and just judgments prevail over all, for You alone are impartial. Let me see Your justice in action so that I might know my salvation». And when David says *let my eyes behold uprightness*, it's as if he's asking: «What is it, O God, that You desire, from me?» To which the answer comes back: *Uprightness*. «Then», David says, «I seek the same. I desire exactly what You desire. And if, at this moment, I ask to be delivered from this great danger, I do so because it is Your wish that I be delivered. My soul longs for that which You long for».

The psalmist's thinking is truly admirable. Would that every day of our life, indeed every moment of our life, were an ongoing effort to unite our will with the will of God; to understand God's will, and to desire it as if it were completely our own. And would that every moment found us seeking the face of God, which is itself God's will, shining in our hearts.

In order to obtain his appeal for justice, the psalmist asks God to remember his personal experiences:

the generation of those who seek the face of the God of Jacob» (Ps 24:6); «I will seek Your face, O Lord; do not turn Your face from me» (Ps 27:8); «You turned away Your face and I became troubled» (Ps 30:7); «When shall I come and appear before the face of God?» (Ps 42:2). In addition, there are many more passages in the psalms that speak of God's «eyes», or His «looking at» (or «away») from the psalmist, which are directly related to the experience of seeing and being seen by God.

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3 *You have tested my heart,  
You have visited me in the night;  
You have tried me by fire,  
and no injustice was found in me.*

«You have *tested* me, O Lord, You have examined me; You have considered the depths of my heart, and have found me pure and holy. There is nothing in me that is not in harmony with your will. As gold is tried in the fire, so have you tried me (cf. Wis 3:6)». And when did God subject David to such a test? At a time when it was easy for him to commit a sin? Or when he himself may have wished to commit a sin, but was unable to? Or was it when the temptation to sin was great, and he feared he might not be able to resist? (cf. 2 Sam 16:5-13). To be sure, it was in the course of such a *trial by fire* (cf. Ps 66:12) that David's resolve stood firm, for he did not yield to sin. In the face of great difficulty he remained steadfast and unwavering before God.

*You have visited me in the night.* These few words conceal a great mystery. «You visited me, O Lord, in the night. Do you remember? In the middle of that night when I was all alone, You came to me».<sup>6</sup> When did God come and visit David? Many times. Perhaps he is referring to the time when he was in the cave, and could have killed Saul, but chose not to (1 Sam 24:1-8). How much anguish did David suffer on that night! He had finally found his sworn enemy, who had been threatening him at every turn, and at that very moment David saved his life! That was a visitation from God.

Perhaps David is thinking of another night, on which he may have examined his conscience and seen his inner purity. For dur-

6. The Hebrew says «You have come upon me by night», suggesting a nocturnal struggle.

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ing moments of quiet and isolation, especially during the night, the conscience is wonderfully able to examine itself. The night is by far the most beneficial time for self-reflection in the mirror of God. It is the best time to be face-to-face with God and hear His voice. The night is rich with possibilities, for it is then that the all-powerful Word of God Himself comes to us (Wis 18:14-15), provided, of course, that there is silence within us and our conscience does not accuse us of anything.<sup>7</sup>

*You have tried me by fire.* When was this? «On the night when I was consumed by thoughts, sorrows, and suffering; when I was overwhelmed by agony and pierced to the heart by dark thoughts and disturbing images». How often, during such moments, are we besieged and devoured by negative thoughts that make our existence unbearable! Would that at such moments all our thoughts would yield completely to God; would that at such moments we might triumph over our lower emotions and earthly desires. When David says, *You have tried me by fire*, it's as if he's saying: «No unrighteousness was found in me. Not because I am without sin, but because the inner disposition of my soul is upright and honorable. It has always been clean and pure before You. O Lord, I have not committed any sin in my conscience, in my desire, or in anything that I have willed».

Whoever sins deliberately, and knows within himself that he is transgressing the commandments of the Lord, puts himself at a great distance from God. To such a person Saint Paul says the following: *If, after we have been given knowledge of the truth, we should deliberately commit any sins, then there is no longer any*

7. On the importance of prayer at night, see above, Psalm 63:1 (chap. 1); and below, Psalm 19:3 (chap. 9). On «silence» in prayer, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Church at Prayer*, 21-22; and id., *The Way of the Spirit*, 123-124.



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*sacrifice* (Heb 10:26). The person who has been reborn of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 3:5), and who has received the knowledge of the truth, no longer sins (cf. Jn 5:14; 8:11). If he should sin deliberately, what sort of God will descend to earth for him? What new sacrifice will be offered for his sins? On the contrary, one day when he least expects it, he will be called to account, which is why Saint Paul says, *as long as this «today» lasts* (Heb 3:13) we should *cast off* from ourselves every thought and *every work of darkness* (cf. Rom 13:12).<sup>8</sup>

4 *That my mouth might not speak of the works of men,  
for the sake of the words of Your lips,  
I have kept ways that are hard.*

«I have *kept ways that are hard*, my God, so that *my mouth might not speak of the works of men*; so that I might not be preoccupied with their transgressions, and their proud and corrupted thoughts. So that *my mouth might not seek vanities* – for the mouth utters that which is contained in the heart – and so that I might refrain from the foolishness and futility of men, *I have kept ways that are hard*». I have, in other words, lived an austere and difficult life of self-denial.<sup>9</sup> No one can enter paradise in comfort. In the words of Saint Isaac the Syrian, no one has ever been known to enter Heaven while living an easy life.<sup>10</sup> Thus when we read Holy Scrip-

8. On Hebrews 3:13, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 134, 159.

9. The Hebrew says «I muzzled my mouth», indicating that David has not only endured God's inward testing, but has refused to allow any word of doubt or bad faith to pass the barrier of his lips; cf. Job 2:10.

10. St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily* 59: «The path of God is a daily cross. No one has ascended into heaven by means of ease, for we know where the way of ease leads and how it ends» (*Homilies*, 290).

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ture, when we consider God's law, and especially when we look at our life in light of God's words, it can all seem rather hard, and often we wish to cry out: *The saying is hard* (Jn 6:60). However, it is precisely in the midst of such hard and difficult situations that our love for God is tested and deepens.<sup>11</sup>

Whether we wish to or not, we are going to experience suffering. God will ask us to make many sacrifices and expect many deprivations in our life. How will we be able to endure them all? In the same way that David did, namely, *for the sake of the words of Your lips*. Let us recall that this is the moment when David's suffering was at its greatest. He is under tremendous physical and mental stress. He is being pursued, hunted like an animal. He could be killed at any moment, and his soul is shaken by the threat of imminent death. To be sure, his entire life has been a protracted drama, a prolonged struggle between life and death. He has tried to understand why, but there is no explanation. Everything seems irrational, without meaning or purpose. He can't explain why it is that he suffers, or why he is being made to endure so much. But the man of faith knows the reason: *For the sake of the words of Your lips*. It is enough for me to know, O Lord, that this is what You have asked for; that this is what You have willed for me. There is only one way to explain our difficulties: they are exactly the things that God wants us to experience and endure, and so *for the sake of the words of Your lips I have kept ways that are hard*. David senses

11. Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love* 2.24: «All the discourses of our Lord contain these four elements: commandments, doctrines, threats, and promises. With the help of these we patiently accept every kind of hardship, such as fasting, vigils, sleeping on the ground, toil and labor in acts of service, insults, dishonor, torture, death and so on. And so *for the sake of the words of Your lips*, the psalmist says, *I have kept ways that are hard* (Ps 17:4)» (*Philokalia* 2:69).

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that, not only has the law been ordained by God, but so too have his sufferings, which are likewise expressions of the divine will. He sees God, as it were, standing before him, and God speaks to him and says: «I want you to suffer this, to pass through this experience of suffering. I want you to keep *ways that are hard*». «And since You ask this of me, my God, how can I not obey? That is my answer». But it's not an easy answer. And this is why another cry comes forth from his mouth, which we see in the following verse.

5 *Direct my footsteps in Your paths,  
that my steps may not be shaken.*

In other words: «Make my life conform to Your ways, my God, to the ways of Your commandments. Regulate my life as You desire, so *that my steps may not be shaken*. O Lord, the path is difficult, filled with many difficulties, therefore, in order *that my steps may not be shaken*, do not let me walk it alone. I gladly give You the gift of my freedom. Even though I am a king, I prefer to be Your slave. Don't allow me to wander off and be lost! Take hold of me, bind me, make me Your captive; *direct my footsteps* so that they may take me wherever You wish. Whatever it may cost me, it is enough for me to know that You are leading the way».

6 *I have cried, for You have hearkened unto me, O God.  
Incline Your ear unto me, and hearken unto my words.*

Here begins the second part of the psalm. «*Incline, O Lord, unto me*, like a physician stoops down over a sick man. Bend down over me, O God, like a mother tenderly bends down over her child. Bend down to me, O Lord, and receive my words within Your

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hearing». <sup>12</sup> In saying these words, David is asking for something he knows he will receive, which is clear from the first part of the verse: *I have cried, for You have hearkened unto me*. Placing God's activity at a moment in the past – «You *have hearkened* unto me» – is a testimony to his past experience, in fact to an entire series of experiences. <sup>13</sup> «Every time I called upon You, every time I *cried* out to You, my God, You heard me». And because David is absolutely certain of God's readiness to respond, he expresses his desire in the past tense. Scripture can also express God's faithfulness by using the future form: *I will cry out and You will hear me* (cf. Ps 57:2-3).

Experience is of inestimable value in our spiritual life. Experiences are important because they give us the courage to continue. But woe to the person who does not have spiritual experiences. Our inner experiences of God during prayer – of His presence, of communion with Him, and the spiritual joy that this gives us – herald the joy that will be ours for eternity. It is as if we were

<sup>12</sup>. The image of God «bending» or «stooping down» occurs frequently in the elder's teachings, and is a way of describing the activity of God's uncreated energy (cf. *The Way of the Spirit*, 37, 42). It finds many parallels in St. John Chrysostom's doctrine of «condescension», which he briefly defines in his treatise *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 3.15: «What is this 'condescension'? God condescends whenever He is not seen as He is, but in the way one incapable of beholding Him is able to look upon Him. In this way, God reveals Himself by accommodating what He reveals to the weakness of vision of those who behold him» (FOTC 72:101-102). Chrysostom stresses that no creatures, be they humans or angels, see God in His essence, but rather in the self-revelation of His energies.

<sup>13</sup>. Note that in Greek the verb is in the aorist form, which in this instance may be understood as equivalent to the English simple past, i.e., «You *hearkened* to me».

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already living the resurrection to which we are journeying. And this is precisely why we have the strength to confront life's difficulties with so much patience. Our journey is *per crucem*, that is, «through the cross», but *ad lucem*, «to the light». And we make our way to the light having already tasted, having already experienced, the joy of communion with God.

7 *Wondrously show Your mercies, O You Who save those that hope in You from them that have resisted Your right hand.*

«Show me *Your mercies* in a way that is marvelous and wonderful». This is as if the prophet-king were saying, «work a miracle for me, my God». Indeed his situation is so difficult that only a miracle could save him. However, he does not doubt that God is the One Who *saves those that hope in Him from those that resist His right hand*; from those, that is, who attempt to resist and defy God's power.

The phrase *Your right hand* can be taken as a dative of means, so that the sense is: «By means of Your right hand, by means of Your power, You save those that hope in You».<sup>14</sup> But it can also be understood as the direct object of *them that have resisted*. In either case, David is assured of God's powerful and loving presence, and thus he fearlessly speaks to God in the words of the following verse.

8 *Guard me, O Lord, as the pupil of the eye.  
In the shelter of Your wings You will shelter me,*

«In the same way that men cherish and protect their eyes, protect me, O Lord, as if I were the most precious and most beloved thing

14. Evagrius, *On Psalm 17*, associates this verse with the «hand of God» in Job 30:21 (BE11EΣ 80:33-34).

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You possessed». The *pupil of the eye* encompasses the reflection or image we see in another person's eye, the thing we focus on when we look at someone and approach him freely and directly. If the other person should move even slightly, the reflection is lost. He or she must face you directly, and remain motionless. «So too, O Lord, may You always be turned toward me». <sup>15</sup>

*In the shelter of Your wings You will shelter me.*<sup>16</sup> What tenderness! What affection! If only we could realize and understand how great God's love is for us! *In the shelter of Your wings*, that is, as a hen shelters her brood (cf. Lk 13:34), so too will You shelter me, O God. Here he uses the image of wings in order to illustrate the swiftness with which God comes to our aid.<sup>17</sup> To us, however, it often seems that God's help is slow in coming, and sometimes even arrives too late. But this is not so, for God's help arrives exactly when it is needed, neither too soon nor too late, but exactly on time. *In the shelter of Your wings You will shelter me*, by which he means, «I know that You will shelter me». The psalmist uses the future tense precisely in order to express his certainty, just as we said a moment ago. You *will* shelter me. From whom?

15. Compare St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, *On Prayer* 56: «Guard me, O Lord, as the pupil of the eye (Ps 17:8), so that I may contemplate You eternally, O glorious, ineffable Master» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:348).

16. The Hebrew says «in the shadow of your wings», which is also the rendering of Symmachus.

17. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Song of Songs* 15: «I have often heard in Scripture that wings are attributed to God, as when David says *in the shelter of Your wings You will shelter me* (Ps 17:8), and they represent God's power, blessedness, and incorruptibility» (GNO 6:448); and St. John Chrysostom, *Against the Anomoians* 8: «And if Scripture speaks of God's 'wings,' we do not say that the divine nature is somehow feathered, but understand that this signifies help, security, shelter, and the like» (PG 48:769).

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9 *From the face of the ungodly who have oppressed me.  
My enemies have surrounded my soul.*

«From such men as these, who have oppressed me and seek my life. They have surrounded me, O Lord, like wild animals, and they are ready to tear me into pieces».

10 *They have enclosed themselves with their own fat,  
their mouth has spoken arrogance.*

The fat on a piece of meat is the symbol of human prosperity and luxury. It is the symbol of people who have amassed much material wealth, and whose lives are filled with earthly pleasures and enjoyments. These are people who are self-absorbed, selfishly turned in on themselves, and who become hardened and insensitive to the pain and suffering of others. «Fat» can also symbolize the area around the heart or the heart itself, which is the seat and source of mercy and pity. It's as if David is saying: «They have closed off their hearts, O Lord; they have become hardened and insensitive. Their mouths utter rash and vile words; they make threats against my life. They are filled with rage, they perpetually speak of vengeance, and they make oaths to kill me. This, however, is at variance with Your will, and so they are in conflict with You. And that is why *their mouth has spoken arrogance*. And have You seen, my God, how:

11 *Having cast me out they now encircle me,  
they have set their eyes to look askance on the earth.*

«Have you seen how they have chased me away from my home, from my country; how they have forced me to flee into the wilderness, and now have me surrounded? There is nowhere for me to

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go.<sup>18</sup> They have fixed their eyes *on the earth* and are determined to see me buried beneath it. They will not rest until they wipe me off the face of the earth». The phrase *their eyes look askance* indicates their determination to destroy the psalmist.<sup>19</sup>

12 *They have seized me like a lion eager for his prey,  
like a lion's whelp that lurks in secret places.*

«They have made me a fugitive, they have tracked me down; they have waited for me like a lion waits to attack his prey, or as a small lion waits in hiding for its victim». The young lion, because of its relatively small size and inexperience, is forced to hide and take its prey by surprise. Nevertheless, it is a powerful creature seething with youthful energy, and knows exactly when to strike. It is a dangerous beast indeed! And these men are every bit as dangerous. «However, my God, no matter how much they exert themselves to destroy me, and even if the danger is imminent, breathing down my neck, You stand above them, ready to protect and save me».

13 *Arise, O Lord, overtake them and trip their heels;  
deliver my soul from ungodly men,  
draw Your sword against the enemies of Your hand.*

18. This verse is often given a spiritual interpretation, as in St. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love* 2.18: «When the demons expel self-restraint from your intellect and besiege you with thoughts of fornication, turn to the Lord with tears and say, *they that cast me out have now encircled me* (Ps 17:11)» (*Philokalia* 2:68).

19. The Hebrew says «Their eyes they set to incline in the land». Given the predatory nature of their activity, made explicit in the next verse, the sense is that they scour the land for objects of prey.



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Here begins the third and final section of the psalm. *Arise, O Lord, overtake them.* Why does David say «arise»? Is God sleeping? Certainly not. The «sleep» of God designates God's patience and long-suffering, which so often appears inexplicable to us, but which is necessary for His plan of salvation.<sup>20</sup> Often He waits in order to see what we will do. Yet when faced with difficulties, our typical response is not to endure them patiently, still less to see them as an opportunity for spiritual struggle and growth. Instead, our only thought is to avoid and flee from whatever makes us uncomfortable. We become anxious very easily, allow irrational fears to consume us, and struggle blindly to extract ourselves from difficult situations by any means possible. Yet it's so much better to trust in God; to feel and to know that at such moments God is with us, that He only appears to be sleeping. Instead of caving in to fear, we should patiently and bravely await His arising, His return, when He will come rushing to our rescue. Would that we could at least cry out loudly, and with faith, as does the psalmist, and say: *Arise, O Lord, overtake them and trip their heels.* David, knowing all too well how dangerous his enemies are, asks God to «trip them up», to foil their plots against him.

*Deliver my soul from ungodly men, draw Your sword against the enemies of Your hand.* «*Deliver my soul* from Saul, who has become an *ungodly man*, and from all *ungodly men*. Redeem the royal sword, the royal dignity, which You permitted to fall into the hands of Your enemies, into the hands of a man who resists the works of Your hands, who seeks to subvert Your will. Reclaim the kingdom from Saul, and strip him of his royal trappings (cf. 1 Sam 15:11, 35). *Overtake them and trip their heels; deliver my soul from ungodly men, draw Your sword against the enemies of Your*

20. On the «sleep» of God, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 98, 102.

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*hand*. Do not allow my soul to fall into their hands. Raise up Your sword against those who resist You».

Here we may associate the «soul» with the image of the «sword». *Deliver my soul*, which is *Your sword*. What a wonderful expression! The soul of every faithful person is like a sword in the hand of God, which He uses like a weapon to realize His plan. When we hold a weapon in our hands, we are in a position to use it however and whenever we wish, and this is how our souls should be in the hands of God. In addition, the phrase *of Your hand* conceals another meaning. God's *enemies* are all those who believe they can do whatever they wish. They hatch plots, devise schemes, and put their plans into action. Nevertheless, they are *the enemies of Your hand*, which means that You, God, have them within Your grasp, at Your disposal. You are free to do with them whatever You wish. Our salvation, even when all hope seems lost, is in God's hands. He is able to save us from the greatest dangers, whether they be spiritual, physical, or any other kind.

14 O Lord, *from the few separate them from the earth in their life,  
though with Your hidden treasures their belly has been filled.  
They are satisfied with sons,  
and have left the remnants to their children.*

«Lord, remove the ungodly from this earth. Separate them, and distance them from the faithful few. Wipe out evil men *in their life*, that is, at the very moment when they think they have arrived at the height of their power; when they believe that soon they will attain all they have ever wanted. Remove them from this life so that they are no longer a scandal to the faithful, for the prosperity of sinners has always been a stumbling block for the faithful».

*With Your hidden treasures has their belly been filled.* «Lord,

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the faithless, the impious, and my enemies have everything! They want for nothing. Not only do they fill themselves with all the food of the land, but they are *filled with Your hidden treasures*; with the choicest and rarest of things *has their belly been filled*. The things which the pious and the poor have never seen even in their dreams, these wretched men feast on abundantly». *They are filled with sons*, «their houses are filled with male offspring», which is yet another sign and symbol of human happiness.

Let us also consider another version of this line found in a number of important manuscripts, namely: «They are filled with the flesh of swine».<sup>21</sup> As is well known, eating the flesh of swine was forbidden among the Jews (cf. Lev 11:7-8), and indicates that the evildoers mentioned in the psalm are also transgressors of the law. The same image also suggests rich and heavy food consumed to satiety, the pleasures of the palate, and the flourishing of the flesh. *They are filled* means that they consumed whatever they wished, and even then there remained such an excess that there was enough to feed their descendants.

21. Here the elder is referring to an important variant found in the Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint. The verse as cited above («They are satisfied with sons») is a rendering of the Hebrew generally adopted by the Greek Fathers. See, for example, St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 17* (PG 27:108D); Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 17* (PG 23:164D); Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm 17* (PG 80:972B); St. Hesychios of Jerusalem, *On Psalm 17*: «Contrary to what some people think, the psalmist does not mean to say that they are ‘filled with sons’ as with food, but to indicate their ingratitude, for they received many sons from God, but instead of raising them virtuously, they made them the heirs of all their vices» (PG 93:1185); and Euthymios Zigabenos, *On Psalm 17*: «Some versions read: ‘They are filled with the flesh of swine,’ which means they were filled with every kind of uncleanness. However, the more precise interpreters read here the word ‘sons,’ which is in fact the word that appears in the Hebrew» (PG 128:216BC).

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15 *But as for me, I will appear before Your face in righteousness;  
I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me.*

How differently does the psalmist view things! His enemies live in order to indulge in sensual pleasures, but David's mind is on spiritual enjoyments. They live earthly lives for the sake of earthly things, but David soars high above the earth. He reckons as rubbish and dung (cf. Phil 3:8) the things with which they fill themselves. There is nothing in common between them.

«Those men, my God, are satisfied with earthly things». But the human soul can never be satisfied with material things, for we have an infinite desiring capacity in the face of which nothing finite can ever satisfy us. It follows, then, that the psalmist's enemies are deluded, that their entire life is nothing more than a kind of false impression, for they believe themselves to be satisfied, when in fact they are not. «I, however, *will appear before You in righteousness*. I will be satisfied, not with material goods, but when I see Your glory». Here we see an antithesis between those whose pleasure and happiness are derived solely from material things, and those who find their enjoyment in the spiritual delights of God.

When David says *I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me*, and *I will appear before Your face*, he is referring to an event that takes place in the Temple, where God is seen and heard.<sup>22</sup> But

22. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*: «Whenever David speaks about 'appearing before God's presence,' he is overcome by humility and as a result does not ask to *see* God, but rather that he might *be seen* by God; that God, in other words, will look down from heaven and see him. We find similar expressions among all those who seek God: they stand before the Lord with the knowledge that God sees all and consequently them too» (421); and id., *On St. Hesychios*: «Why does Hesychios use the passive verb 'to be seen'? Usu-

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the phrase also includes any other time or place in which God is revealed to man, as when He appeared to Moses (Ex 19:18-20; 33:11-23), and to many others who sought Him. In this life, a person of righteousness, purity, and holiness may see and behold God.<sup>23</sup>

The words *I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me*, are slightly different in the Hebrew, which says «I will be filled when Your form – or ‘image’ – arises». This is worthy of our attention. We are often scandalized when we see corrupt men flourishing, and the ill-gotten prosperity of sinners. All around us people are engaging in sinful behavior without any apparent

ally we want ‘to see,’ we want to look *at* or *upon* God, but Hesychios is much more humble, as was the psalmist, who said, ‘I want You to see me, and not for me to see You’ (cf. Ps 17:15). To ‘be seen’ is to live in the knowledge of God’s presence, and so if I desire ‘to see’ God without being seen by Him, it means that I have lost something within my soul. To be able to stand before the Lord and be seen by Him is a gesture of humility, for I am unworthy to cast my eyes upon God (cf. Lk 18:13). What matters is that He sees me, and this gives me joy; what ‘I’ see is a matter of indifference» (118-119).

23. Compare St. Ilias the Presbyter, *Gnomic Anthology* 4.97: «The soul still engaged in ascetic struggle... cries out like the soul in the Song of Songs: *By night on my bed I sought Him Whom I love; I sought Him but did not find Him; I called Him but He did not listen to me. I will rise now through more strenuous prayer and will go about the city, and look for my Beloved* (cf. Song 3:1-2). Perhaps I shall find Him Who is present in all things and beyond all things, *and will be filled when His glory is made manifest to me* (Ps 17:15)» (*Philokalia* 3:59); and St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, *On Prayer* 52: «In many places, David speaks of the ‘face of God,’ saying: *O Lord, You have turned away Your face, and I am troubled* (Ps 30:7); and *do not turn Your face away from me* (Ps 27:9); and *turn Your face away from my sins* (Ps 51:9)... and he counsels us to *seek the face of the Lord at all times* (Ps 105:4), for if we should attain to the vision of His divinity, we will experience unspeakable joy, and godly pleasure and delight, just as David says: *I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me* (Ps 17:15)» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:336).

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consequences. Those who struggle to live lives of virtue, on the other hand, are but a small minority, and often suffer terribly, and so the question arises: Am I making a mistake in rejecting worldly pleasures for a life of virtue? Absolutely not. Those who have fallen away from God are living only in the sensations of the moment, but we are living for eternity. Thus the phrase *when Your glory is made manifest to me* conceals what we would call an «eschatological» meaning, that is, something that concerns the definitive future and final condition of our life in God. Through his thoughts and in his heart, David is living in a moment of the future, a moment when he will be resurrected from the dead and will behold the form, the image, of God in Christ.<sup>24</sup> Even though David is in the world he lives beyond the world (cf. Jn 15:19), in a moment of time beyond the end of time. His words are a ray of light from the future, a foreshadowing of the blessings to come. In order to strengthen himself, David compares this present life with eternal life, making this a prophecy of blessedness after death. In the midst of the night, a light shines; in the midst of the overwhelming despair that grips him, he is struck by a bolt

24. See St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogue on the Trinity*: «The glory of the Father and the Son is one and the same, and this is why the psalmist, when speaking to God on behalf of all those who have been made righteous, says, *but as for me, in righteousness I will appear before Your face; I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me* (Ps 17:15), for the ‘face’ and ‘image’ of God (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), is nothing other than God’s Word, through Whom God is known to those on earth, shining with the same glory throughout creation. And this is also why God says to Moses, *truly, as I live, and as My Name is living, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord* (Num 14:21), for all things have been filled with Christ, in Whom God is visible to us, for *whoever has seen the Son has seen the Father* (cf. Jn 14:9)» (604CD) (SC 246:62).

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of lightning: the reality of a life beyond this one, where he will see God *face to face* (1 Cor 13:12). But he will only see Him there to the extent that he has already seen Him here.

The words *I will be filled* conceal yet another meaning, with which we should be especially concerned. «I am filled» when I eat, that is, after I have partaken of food. Here, however, «being filled» signifies participation in the glory of God. When I say: «I see God», I mean «I delight in God, I participate in God's life». Thus «being filled» is a condition or experience that presupposes and expresses union with God. This union is not a mixture or confusion of human nature with divine nature, but an assimilation of the human to the divine through a special grace of God. In this way, to be «filled with the glory of God» means that we participate in the life of the divinity, in God's divinizing energies, and not in His essence, and so we become like God, sharing in his attributes.<sup>25</sup>

To return to the psalm verse, David is saying: «Lord, those men are filled to bursting with material things, but I do not wish to be

25. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes* 4: «The Lord became for us bread descending from heaven (Jn 6:31) and living water (cf. Jn 4; Rev 21:6). Somewhere in the Psalms, David confesses his thirst for this when he offers this blessed malady to God and says: *My soul thirsted for the living God; when shall I come and appear before the face of God?* (Ps 42:3). It seems to me that the power of the Spirit has instructed him in these lofty teachings, since he said also that his desire would be fulfilled: *I will appear before Your face; I will be filled when Your glory is made manifest to me* (Ps 17:15). Now in my view this glory is the true virtue, the good that is unmixed with evil, which comprises every concept concerned with goodness. This is God the Word Himself, the *virtue that covered the heavens* (Hab 3:3), and rightly have those who hunger for this justice of God been called 'blessed.' For if a man has truly *tasted* the Lord (Ps 34:9), that is, if he has received God into himself, he is filled with Him for whom he has thirsted and hungered» (ACW 18:128-129).

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simply a mass of flesh that roves around and consumes things, but rather a mind that sees God, a soul that touches God. I prefer to participate in Your life, to become one with You. I want my life to conform to the form of Your life (cf. Rom 8:29). I want my life to be hidden within Your life (cf. Col 3:3), so that I will be You, and You me».

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This extraordinary psalm is at once simple and profound. It is the prayer of a man who is suffering. If today we ourselves are not suffering, let us not forget that in all likelihood things will be different tomorrow. More importantly, right now, all around us, countless friends, loved ones, relatives and acquaintances are suffering, and they are, and never cease to be, the members of our own body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). Let us pray for them with the words of this psalm and with similar words. And even though some of us may not seem to be suffering today, the deeper truth is that we are always suffering. Everything around us can become a cause of suffering. Our struggle to live virtuously is itself a source of pain. Satan, *like a roaring lion* (1 Pet 5:8), *like a lion's whelp that lurks in secret places* (Ps 17:12), waits for an opportunity to ensnare us in temptations. Our friendships and our loves can likewise be the cause of much pain and suffering. In the end, we can say that our whole life is a passion play, a history of extended suffering. However, let us not lose sight of the deeper meaning offered to us by the psalmist. Pain, difficulties, misfortunes, and suffering in general are the signs of divine visitation. Those who suffer are the special children of God. And so when our life is untroubled and things seem to be going well, we should stop and ask ourselves if



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we have not somehow moved away from God, because it is precisely suffering that constitutes our glory, our crown.

When we suffer, we can offer two things to God. The first is our virtue, by which I mean the witness of a clear conscience at peace with itself and God. This is our longing for *uprightness* (Ps 17:2) and for the sovereignty of God's will over our own. Our will should be in accord with the will of God. The second is our complete trust in God; the patient, hopeful surrender of ourselves to God. There will come times in our life – or rather, such times will come continually – when all seems lost; when it appears that even those we love and trusted have abandoned us, that they have grown distant and estranged. There will be moments when black clouds gather menacingly over our heads. But it is during such moments, my beloved, that God is visiting us, in order to see our patience, to test the quality of our trust, which is the proof of our love for Him.

We said a moment ago that the faithful are often scandalized by the prosperity of sinners. And it is true that if we look at things from a purely human perspective it can seem as if God has distributed His blessings unjustly. Here, where He should have given a measure of happiness, He has given only misfortune. And there, where He should have dispensed riches, He gave only poverty. And where poverty was in order, he lavished wealth. When we wait for a blessing, He often deals us a hard blow, while at the same time He maintains smiles on the faces of those around us. In a way that echoes modern social concerns, we might say that God discriminates, and this is something that scandalizes us.

Why does this scandalize us? The answer is simple. It is because our hearts are still attached to earthly things, still clinging to false «goods» that we continue to covet and crave. Thus the solution to our dilemma must be sought elsewhere, and this means that

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we should not be hasty in abolishing whatever strikes us as discrimination or injustice. We live in a time of rapid change, when every innovation is presented to us as «progress», but before real change, real progress, can take place, something must first change within us. And for this to happen we must become completely estranged to all things earthly and human, to all human logic, to all human ways of thinking, and to every so-called material good. We must be indifferent in the face of all things. And only then, when we have become strangers to all, can God become all things to us, as if there existed nothing else in the world for us except God. It is this alone that can grant us true and lasting tranquility. Otherwise, if our heart is attached to anything earthly, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to be, we can be sure that it will make us suffer.

The psalmist reveals to us, in all its clarity, an eschatological way of life. At the beginning of the psalm, and again at its conclusion, he shows us the search for the face of God; a search to which he was continuously devoted and by means of which he united the present with the future. For him, the present and the future are one and the same, as they should be for us. For the psalmist, the presence of God is always something tangible, an experience that begins here and will continue into the next life. David's search for God must become our search as well. It should become our daily occupation, our food and our drink, our ongoing work. Nothing else should have any value for us.

Let us consider one final verse from the psalm: *For the sake of the words of Your lips have I kept ways that are hard* (v. 4). If we want to belong to God, our way will be a hard one. Suffering and arduous journeying is the way of the Apostles, the way of the Fathers, and the way of the Saints. It is the only road that leads to heaven (cf. Acts 14:22). In the same way that worldly people

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look upon the so-called «good things» of this life, and in the same way that conquering soldiers look upon the spoils of war, so too should we look upon the various difficulties that we encounter on our journey. We must learn to love to struggle; we must learn to love the *ways of the Lord that are hard*, regardless of the form they take. We must be ready to suffer with joy, with enthusiasm, and with a deep sense of gratitude. Then we will be filled with God's glory.



3  
Psalm 110 (LXX 109)

*A psalm of David.*

- 1 *The Lord said to my Lord:*  
    *«Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies*  
    *a footstool for Your feet».*
- 2 *A rod of power will the Lord send to You out of Sion;*  
    *You rule in the midst of Your enemies.*
- 3 *With You is dominion in the day of Your power,*  
    *in the splendors of Your saints.*  
    *From the womb before the Morning-star,*  
    *I have begotten You.*
- 4 *The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind:*  
    *«You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek».*
- 5 *The Lord at Your right hand has shattered kings in the day of*  
    *His wrath.*
- 6 *He will judge among the nations,*  
    *He will fill them with corpses,*  
    *He will crush the heads of many upon the earth.*
- 7 *He will drink of the brook in the way;*  
    *therefore will He lift up His head.*

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We shall now consider a psalm whose brevity stands in marked contrast to its beauty and magnificence. It is a psalm filled with tremendous power and the highest theological meaning. It has, moreover, a special connection to the feast of the Nativity, which

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we will be celebrating in a few days.<sup>1</sup> As the title tells us, Psalm 110 is a «psalm of David».

1 *The Lord said to my Lord:*

*«Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies  
a footstool for Your feet».*

In an exalted visionary experience, David heard God speaking to the Christ, the Anointed One, inviting Him to sit at His right hand. That David's vision is a glimpse into the future is clear from the language he uses. In the first part of this verse, the verb «to say» (i.e., «said») is not the ordinary Hebrew word for «speaking» or «saying» ('amar), but rather a special verb meaning «to utter a prophecy» or «to predict» (nibba'), which occurs relatively rarely in the Hebrew Bible. We may therefore understand the verse to say: «The Lord uttered a prophecy to my Lord». And this brings us to a question: why is the word «Lord» used twice? Are there two Lords? How is that possible? The first Lord is God the Father. The second Lord is the Son, the Christ. Why, then, does David refer to both the Father and the Son by the same title? To show that God and Christ are one, that they are two Persons in one nature, that they are One God. David did not overhear a conversation between two separate gods, but rather a dialogue within the life of the One God. The Word is truly the Son of God, for He is one in essence with God the Father.<sup>2</sup>

1. Psalm 110 is read in its entirety on Christmas Eve at the beginning of the Ninth Hour. In addition, verses 1-3 are chanted at the Great Vespers and Liturgy of Christmas Day, and verses 3-4 (beginning with «From the womb I have begotten You») are chanted during the Entrance with the Gospel.

2. Psalm 110:1 is invoked by the Lord in the New Testament: «And when

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The prophet has before his eyes the Word made flesh, *born of a woman, born under the law* (Gal 4:4); a child *wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger* (Lk 2:7). He sees the Lord Himself, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, born as a child in the squalor of a stable. Yet David does not recoil; he is not offended by what might have easily scandalized him. Instead, he believes completely in what he sees, without any doubt or hesitation. And even though this child is David's own heir, descended directly from his

Jesus taught in the Temple, He said, 'How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? For David himself, inspired by the Spirit, declared: *The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for Your feet*' (Mk 12:36; cf. Acts 2:34). This psalm verse consequently figured prominently in early Christian debates with the Jews, and later with the Arians, who likewise denied the divinity of Christ, cf. St. Justin Martyr, *Apology* 44; id., *Dialogue with Trypho* 56, 83; and the *Epistle of Barnabas* 12. See also St. Athanasios, *Against the Arians*: «Since David says *the Lord said to my Lord*, it is clear that, even before the Incarnation, the Son was an eternal Lord and King, the very Word and Image of the Father, and thus He was not 'created' like the Arians say» (PG 26:173); St. Basil, *Against Eunomios*: «If it is true that *there is one God and Father*, then it is also true that *there is one Lord Jesus Christ* the Savior (1 Cor 8:6); but for the Arians the Savior is not God, and thus it must have been in vain that David said *the Lord said to my Lord*, and likewise when John said *in the beginning was the Word* (Jn 1:1)» (PG 29:705A); St. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God* 5: «The Arians say 'show us where Scripture puts the Son together with the Father and calls the Father Lord?' I will not only show you this, but prove that Scripture calls the Father 'Lord' and the Son 'Lord,' and that it calls the Father 'God' and the Son 'God.' Where can we find this? Once when Christ was speaking to the Jews, he said: 'What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he? And they said to him: 'David's.' He said to them: 'How then does David in the Spirit call him *Lord*, saying: *The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand?*' (Mt 22:42-44). Do you see how both Father and Son are called Lord?» (FOTC 72:145-146); cf. id., *On Psalm* 110 (PG 55:265, 275).

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own flesh and blood (Acts 2:29-30), He appears wrapped not in royal robes but in tattered cloths and bandages. Yet David does not hesitate to call Him «Lord». And how could he not, when the Lord God Himself speaks to this child, calling Him «Lord» and beckons Him to sit at His right hand? We have, then, in the words *the Lord said to my Lord*, a revelation of Christ's divinity and of His consubstantiality with the Father.<sup>3</sup> David speaks regarding that which his eyes have seen, and this is truly admirable, for we can speak only about what we have seen and heard (cf. 1 Jn 1:1).

*Sit at My right hand.* «Take Your place at my right hand side», says the Father to the Son. Why at the right? To show their equality of rank, for the Son is not inferior to the Father.<sup>4</sup> If someone is the same age as we are or older, it is traditional to honor him by seating him to our right. In respect of the divinity, however, there is nothing «older» or more exalted, and thus the invitation to share the same throne is a sign of unity and equality. In the words of the Son of God Himself, *I and the Father are One* (Jn 10:30). As you can see, Psalm 110 is rich with theological concepts.

*Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.* This particular image is derived from the ancient practice of war, when con-

3. The word «consubstantial», which appears in the Nicene Creed, was canonized at the First Ecumenical Council (AD 325) and signifies that the Father and the Son are «one in essence». It was put forward in opposition to the heresy of the Arians, who taught that the Word of God was not «begotten of the Father», but instead was «created» and was consequently of a different essence, inferior to that of the Father.

4. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *Stages in the Spiritual Life*: «Did the Heavenly Father place the Son at His right hand (cf. Ps 110:1) in order to honor Him? No. But because He (i.e., the Son) had become man, and because He had assumed our flesh, God placed Him at his right hand side, since that's how God honors those that love Him» (223).



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quering armies dramatized their victory by publicly humiliating their defeated enemies. According to this practice, the conquering general or king would sit on a throne with his feet resting on the heads of his enemies, who thereby formed the «footstool of his feet». This obviously signified the total, crushing defeat of one's adversaries.<sup>5</sup>

In these lines, two things stand out. First, the total defeat and subjection of Christ's enemies, and second that it is the Father Who assumes the defense of the Son and grants Him victory. It is as if God were saying to Him: «Remain calm there in Your swaddling clothes, for I will fight and conquer for You». The Father fights on behalf of the Son. He wants to show that the Son has no need of any human assistance or defense; no need of any help or protection that we might be able to offer. Instead He has His Father, Who cares for Him. And if He makes us collaborators in His work, He does this not for Himself, but so that we might share in His glory and life.

*2 A rod of power will the Lord send to You out of Sion;  
You rule in the midst of Your enemies.*

Here it is clearly the prophet who is speaking. Having received his prophetic message from the Father, David turns in ecstasy to the Son and says: *A rod of power will the Lord send to You out of Sion.* The *rod of power* is the scepter and symbol of divine authority. It is the *rod of iron* with which He will crush the heads of His enemies, *dashing them into pieces like a potter's vessel* (Ps 2:9). It is the very power of the Father, which He will send to the Son, *out of Sion.*

5. Some Egyptian wall paintings depict an enthroned pharaoh with feet resting on the heads of kneeling captives.

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Why does he say *out of Sion*? Because in Jewish thought Sion was the center of God's kingdom.

*You rule in the midst of Your enemies.* David continues to address Christ. Note that he does not say «You *will* rule», but rather «You *rule*», employing the present tense of the verb, to which he adds *in the midst of Your enemies*. Let us consider the meaning of these two phrases. First, the phrase *You rule* denotes a permanent condition. This is not something that will happen only once; neither does it designate a victory that will be short-lived. The prophet is not referring to a single episode in the life of Christ. In Christ there is neither beginning nor end (cf. Lk 1:33), but rather eternity, for *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* (Heb 13:8). In Christ there is one continuous life forever unfolding in a seamless unity. In his vision, the prophet sees Christ's work in its wholeness, in its entirety.

*In the midst of Your enemies.* The Lord visited the earth. He was born, He was crucified, and He rose from the dead. Nevertheless, all of His enemies have not yet been subdued. When the psalmist refers to the Lord, he is not simply referring to the past events of His earthly life, but to the Lord as the Head of a body that *continues* to live in time and history. This body is the Church (Eph 1:22-23), which continues Christ's work in the world. This verse is therefore a prophecy regarding the life of the Church, which raises trophies of victory in the midst of Her enemies. In order to understand this, think for a moment of an enemy camp. Every day the soldiers rise early in the morning and patrol the perimeter, sending out scouting parties in an effort to advance more deeply into the king's territory. One morning, they awake to find, in the center of their camp, the king's flag, emblazoned with the royal insignia, standing proud and fluttering freely in the breeze. The soldiers know at once that their position has been revealed, their

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security compromised, their fortifications breached. They panic. They are stricken with terror. They know they are completely surrounded, and so they collapse in fear because they know that they have already been defeated.

Through the Church, which is His body, the Lord will establish His rule *in the midst of His enemies*. We have seen this occur time and again and we will continue to see it. Thus the verb «rule», in the present tense, together with the expression *in the midst of His enemies*, are prophecies about the Church and Her experience in history.

3 *With You is dominion in the day of Your power,  
in the splendors of Your saints.  
From the womb before the Morning-star,  
I have begotten You.*

Christ is the beginning, cause, and foundation of all that exists. *In the beginning was the Word* (Jn 1:1). To be «in the beginning» means to exist before every beginning, before all beginnings and causes. Thus the One who is begotten, the One who is born, is without beginning. He has an eternal birth, an origin without beginning in the limitless depths of infinity. David, on the other hand, prophetically beholds Christ's birth in time, in the cave of Bethlehem, yet in his mind he perceives the Son's eternal birth from God the Father, Who says to Him, *today I have begotten you* (Ps 2:7).<sup>6</sup>

6. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On the Life of St. Neilos*: «The words *today I have begotten You* (Ps 2:7) are the greatest demonstration that the Son, to Whom these words refer, is the fruit of the womb of God; that He is one in essence with the Father, sharing in all the rights and privileges of the life of His Heavenly Father, and having as His personal characteristic the fact that He is 'begotten'» (213).

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*With You is dominion in the day of Your power.* What is this day, the *day of the power* of Christ? Some have said that it is the day of Christ's Second Coming, when He will utterly crush his foes.<sup>7</sup> I would say, however, that the day of Christ's power is another day. Of course, there is no «day» in Christ, but rather eternity. All of Christ's life – the «time» before His incarnation, His life on earth, His ascension – constitute one, single day; one, single miracle: a single day of power. However, if we want to pinpoint a particular day in Christ's life as *the* «day of power» *par excellence*, we would have to say that it was the day of His Incarnation, that is, the day He took flesh and became man. Why that day? Because it was then that He worked the greatest miracle of all.

If we look at the various religions of the world, especially the ancient ones of the East, we will see that they place considerable emphasis on human contact with God. Such contact was understood to be a great mystery, and was variously explained and represented. Our own ancient ancestors, who worshipped idols, believed in the carnal couplings of gods and mortals. They were unable to rise to a level of thought worthy of the one, true God. Some of the ancient religions speak of God's birth from a virgin. Common to all of these systems of faith is the idea that God must somehow enter into contact with man, that divinity should commune with humanity. This is a problem that has exercised the minds and hearts of all religions.

And yet that which was so difficult for the human mind to comprehend is exactly what took place on the day when the Word of God became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Word was united with human flesh, and this remains the greatest proof

7. This is the interpretation given by Euthymios Zigabenos, cited by St. Nikodemos, *Commentary on the Psalms* 3:144.

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of God's power, divinity, and love. The Incarnation of the Word is a revelation of His Person, for it was then that He *emptied Himself of His divinity* for the sake of fallen humanity (cf. Phil 2:7). It was then that heaven was poured out like water and covered the thirsty earth.<sup>8</sup> God has conquered humanity, uniting Himself to human nature. This does not mean that God dominates human life like a tyrant. The fire of His divinity does not destroy humanity, but illumines us and makes us godlike. The Incarnation, the Son's voluntary assumption of human form, then, is the «day» of His power, and it is on this day that God says to the Son: «All beginning, power, and authority are with You».<sup>9</sup> You are a child softly cooing in a cave, yet You are God.

*In the day of Your power; in the splendors of Your saints.* Here he joins the *day of power* with the *splendors of the saints*. The word «saints» means «holy ones», and reminds us, not only of the saints, but also of God's holy angels. Like the angels, the saints reveal the

8. Compare Origen, *On Jeremiah* 8.8: «That which came into this life *emptied itself* (Phil 2:7), so that through its emptiness the world would be filled» (SC 232:372); id., *On the Song of Songs* 1.4: «The Incarnation has spread our Lord's sweetness throughout the world, for His *name is ointment poured out* (Song 1:3). He Who was in the form of God *emptied himself* (Phil 2:7); His Name like *ointment was poured out*, so that He might no longer  *dwell in light unapproachable* (1 Tim 6:16) but be approached by all» (ACW 26:74-75); and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Song of Songs* 1: «Scripture says *Your name is ointment poured out* (Song 1:3), a phrase that signifies the traces of divine 'perfume' that have filled the world» (GNO 6:36-37).

9. See St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm* 110: «He said *dominion is with You* (Ps 110:3) so you will not think that the Son is weak and in need of power, as if He were one of the apostles... for the source and principle of their strength comes, not from themselves, but from God. But the Son has this source and principle within His very nature, in His own being and essence. He did not acquire these things at some point after his birth, but as such was He born» (PG 55:272).

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divinity of God. The power, holiness, and love of God are manifested in the *splendors of the saints*. Every saint, in his or her own way, reveals Christ. Every saint manifests the *splendor* of God. Moreover, every saint increases and augments the glory of Christ (cf. Col 1:24). It is not possible to understand the glory of Christ apart from the glory of His saints. Why? Because Christ and the saints are divinized as a single, theanthropic organism, as one body.

*From the womb before the Morning-star, I have begotten You.* In this verse, God the Father continues to address Himself to the Son. The revelation unfolds. The prophecy continues. But then the prophet interrupts the discourse, and inserts the following:

4 *The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind:*

«You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek».

«The Lord has sworn an oath and will not break his promise». How are we to understand this verse? What is its correct meaning? Is the Lord in the habit of swearing oaths?<sup>10</sup> Is it possible for Him to change

10. Since the New Testament forbids the swearing of oaths (cf. Mt 5:34-36), the various «oaths» sworn by God (cf. Gen 22:16; Ps 89:3, etc.) have posed a problem for interpreters. See, for example, St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm* 110: «*The Lord has sworn an oath and will not change His mind* (Ps 110:4). The ‘oath’ that the Lord swears is His word, which may be trusted, since whatever He promises, He does. God does not ‘swear an oath’ like a man does, for God’s word itself is true, is sufficient for surety, and will never change» (PG 27:461); and his *Homily on the Passion and the Cross*, where he argues these points extensively (PG 28:185-250). See also St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm* 119: «Since most things are assured by means of an oath, the fixed and immutable character of God’s commandments is said to be something to which God ‘has sworn.’ This is the habit of Scripture, which says that *the Lord swore an oath to Abraham* (Gen 22:16), and *the Lord swore the truth to David* (Ps 132:11), on account of the absolute certainty of the divine promise» (PG 55:695).

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his mind or renege on his pledges? Certainly not, for *the Lord is faithful* in all his works (2 Thess 3:3). «*You are a priest forever*». «You, Who have been born *from the womb before the Morning-star*, will be an eternal priest». What does *from the womb* mean? It means that the Son has His origin in the innermost, deepest being of the Father. It means that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, that the two are one in essence, from which it follows that the Son is the true child of God. The same, true Son of God, Who was timelessly born *before the Morning-star*, now undergoes a second birth in time. What is the *Morning-star*? It is the light that heralds the dawn.<sup>11</sup> Before the appearance of the stars, before the creation of the world, before the beginning of time itself, the Son was *begotten* timelessly, eternally, everlastingly from the womb of God the Father.<sup>12</sup>

11. The word «Morning-star» (ἑωσφόρος) is not common in Greek, appears only rarely in the Septuagint, and not at all in the New Testament. It was, however, an important term in ancient Alexandria (cf. Athenaeus, *The Learned Banquet* 5.197d, citing Kallixenos of Rhodes, *On Alexandria*), and thus argues for the Egyptian provenance of the Greek Psalter.

12. Among the Church Fathers, the phrase «from the womb» is frequently taken as a reference to the metaphorical «womb» of God, whereas the words «before the Morning-star» are said to signify a time before the Incarnation, history, or even creation itself, although they could also be associated with the inscrutable mystery of the divine birth, cf. St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogue on the Holy Trinity* 2.443: «The human mind is incapable of understanding the mode of divine generation. But so that you might know something about it, God the Father cries out to the Word that came forth from His own nature: *from the womb before the Morning-star, I have begotten you* (Ps 110:3). The expression *from the womb* establishes the legitimacy of the Son's paternity, as one might say, and that He was born of the Father's essence; as an image it is of course necessarily drawn from human reproduction. The words *before the Morning-star* signify that the mode of birth is enveloped in the deep darkness of incomprehensible obscurity. For when the Morning-star begins to ascend from the edge of the western sky, its

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«I, the Father, *have begotten You* eternally, before and beyond all time. And now, in accordance with My good will, You are begotten in time and space,<sup>13</sup> in order to serve as an eternal priest *according to the order of Melchizedek*». What does David wish to tell us by invoking the *order of Melchizedek*? Melchizedek was a king and priest of the gentile nations.<sup>14</sup> Among the Jews, however, there were no kings who were also priests, or priests who served as kings. The figure of the priest-king Melchizedek introduces a new order, a form of priesthood coupled with kingship. Thus Christ does not directly continue the line of the Jewish priesthood, but rather introduces a new priesthood, and a new kingdom. This new kingdom embraces all the nations, in the same way that Melchizedek was a king and priest of the nations.

The fourth verse of Psalm 110 is a prophecy concerning the Church, and of Christ's lordship over all the nations. Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation, bowed down before the person of Melchizedek (Gen 14:19-20; cf. Heb 7:4-8), indicating that the new priesthood of Christ would transcend the Levitical priesthood, just as His new kingdom would transcend the kingdom of

delicate rays are dispersed through the air, producing a faint, feeble light that is but the herald of the sun's fiery brilliance, since the darkness of night has already begun to wane. But when this star is absent from the sky, that is, 'before' it has made its appearance, night's thick veil lies outstretched over all, and even the strongest of vision is dimmed by darkness. Would you not say, then, that this is a marvelously fitting image for the birth of the Son?» (SC 231:302).

13. The «two births» of the Word of God (i.e., the first eternally from God the Father, and the second in time from the Virgin Mary Theotokos), was an ancient doctrine formalized in the sixth century during the reign of the Emperor Justinian. It is found in many Orthodox hymns, especially those for the feast of the Nativity.

14. Compare Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 11, 15, 17.



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the Jews. Consequently we are now in the presence of a spiritual kingdom and a spiritual priesthood. Elsewhere in Sacred Scripture, we encounter Melchizedek as a figure *without father, mother, or genealogy* (cf. Heb 7:3). And just as his beginning is beyond our knowledge, so too is his end, for *his life has no beginning or ending* (Heb 7:3). The priest-king Melchizedek is *without beginning, and without end*, and thus eternal, just as in the case of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Melchizedek was the king of Salem, which means he was the *king of peace* (Heb 7:3). Christ is thus foreordained to bring peace. And yet this new Melchizedek, who was to bring peace, will in fact «wage war against the nations, triumph over them continually, and crush the heads of His vanquished enemies».

Isn't this a strange thing? The king of peace will spread war and cast fire everywhere! Even though He is *peace on earth* (Lk 2:14), He Himself said *do not think that I am here to bring peace on earth* (Lk 12:51), *for I have not come to bring peace, but a sword* (Mt 10:34), and to *cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!* (Lk 12:49). Wherever Christ is present – in the midst of families, cities, and nations – there are sure to be divisions and wars. And these are the signs of His lordship over nations, cities, and the hearts of men.<sup>16</sup>

15. See St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 38.2: «With the appearance of Christ, the prophecy of Melchizedek has been fulfilled and transcended, for the One without a mother was born without a father, for as God He has no mother and as man He has no father. The laws of nature are here abolished so that the world beyond nature might be made manifest» (SC 358:106).

16. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Perfection*: «It is impossible for light and darkness to exist in fellowship, and it is not possible for the stronger element to win without the other being completely destroyed... In recognizing Christ as 'peace,' we shall exhibit the title of Christian in ourselves through the peace in our life. Therefore let us reconcile, not only those fight-

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Let us also recall that Melchizedek made a sacrificial offering of bread and wine (Gen 14:18), and this was a prophecy of the spiritual offering made by Christ; a prophecy, in other words, of Holy Communion, which is an offering of bread and wine.<sup>17</sup> We offer bread, for it is an indispensable staple of human life, and as such is a symbol of human nature. Wine is offered, for it is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, of the divine nature: *Do not be drunk with wine*, Scripture says, *but be filled with the Spirit* (Eph 5:18). Christ is both man and God, and thus we have a new king and priest *according to the order of Melchizedek*.<sup>18</sup> At this point, the prophecy is again interrupted, and the poet continues.

*5 The Lord at Your right hand has shattered kings in the day of  
His wrath.*

The transition to this verse is abrupt, as is the shift in meaning, because in view of the great revelation David was stupefied, and

ing against us on the outside, but also the elements at variance within us, in order that no longer may the *flesh lust against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh* (Gal 5:17). For the definition of peace is the harmony of dissonant parts. Once the civil war in our nature is concluded, then, we also, being at peace within ourselves, become peace and reveal our having taken on the name of Christ as true and authentic» (FOTC 58:100, 102-103).

17. See St. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 4.13: «It was with bread and wine that Melchizedek, the priest of the most high God, received Abraham (Gen 14:18). That table prefigured the mystical table, even as that priest was a type of the Christ, the true high priest, for *You*, it says, *are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek* (Ps 110:4)» (FOTC 37:359).

18. For St. Maximos the Confessor, Melchizedek is both a type of Christ and of humanity's deification in Christ. In so far as Melchizedek has «risen above time and nature» (since he is «without beginning», and «without father or mother») he has been assimilated to God, having become by grace what God is by nature (PG 91:1137).

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said *the Lord at Your right hand has shattered kings*. «The Lord has vanquished Your foes, He has defeated kings». And when kings are defeated, nations are toppled. The description of the battle is dramatic and grand. *The Lord has shattered*, or more literally: *The Lord shattered*. Here he uses the past tense of the verb, in order to underline the complete victory of God. Before his very eyes the future has unfolded as if it were already an accomplished fact.

*The Lord at Your right hand*. A moment ago, David had said that Christ would sit at the right hand of the Father. Here, however, he places the Father at the right hand of Christ. This is because He is engaged in battle and needs the free and unrestricted use of His right hand. However, the equality between the Father and the Son remains, for both the Father's right and left are places of honor.

*The Lord has shattered kings in the day of His wrath*. This verse contains the entire history of the Church, and at the same time looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ. The Lord, as Head of the Church, *shatters His enemies like vessels of clay* (Ps 2:9).

6 *He will judge among the nations,  
He will fill them with corpses,  
He will crush the heads of many upon the earth.*

His judgment is universal. He will judge the nations of the earth. But not all of them, for He will judge only those that did not believe in Him. This is why David says *among the nations*, and not simply «the nations». *He will fill them with corpses*. At the conclusion of this battle, the earth will be filled with the bodies of the dead. This verse should not create in us a sense of dread. Let us focus on its spiritual meaning. The king of peace is also the king of war. He will crush the heads of many upon the earth, and go from

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*victory to victory* (cf. Rev 6:2). And lest we think that this victor came to destroy and not to save (cf. Jn 3:17) – for He is no cruel, bloodthirsty executioner, but rather filled with mercy and love – David immediately adds the following verse:

*7 He will drink of the brook in the way;  
therefore will He lift up His head.*

In the first place it is the Father who will fight. But this does not mean that the Son will not also enter into battle, for He Himself said *I and the Father are One* (Jn 10:30). Christ also fights, and He will be so consumed by battle, so closely identified with us in his-story, that He will fight on our behalf continually, never knowing even a single moment's rest.

The battle of the Church, the spiritual struggle engaged in by Christ's body, is both furious and relentless. And no less fearsome is the struggle of each and every soul, on whose behalf the Lord also fights. And in the midst of His swift, daily interventions on behalf of the soul – while He is in the very throes of battle – He will stop for a moment in order to drink water from *the brook*. After that, He will climb back into His chariot and continue His course, His journey, His struggle. He will be forever at our side, fighting on our behalf.

But what is the *brook*? It is a thing subject to change; something with a beginning and an end, something that moves, flows, passes by, rushes on, and changes. Today the bed of the brook is as dry as dust. Tomorrow it is surging with water, overflowing its bounds; and later, once again, its strength is diminished, its flood abates.

As such, the «brook» is a type and image of all created nature, but especially of mortal human nature, which has a beginning and an end. God draws near to the brook, which now floods and

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now runs dry. He bends down, touching His lips to it, uniting it to His eternal divinity. The *drink from the brook* is thus the moment when the mortal and the immortal come together, creation and creator, God and man. It is the moment when *the Word became flesh* (Jn 1:14). Christ bends down over the brook in order to drink. God descends to man in order to take His fill of human nature – not in order to consume it or destroy it – but to unite it with Himself and to make it godlike. This is what it means when it says that *He will drink of the brook in the way*. This is the magnificence of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

*Therefore will He lift up His head.* His head will be raised up, that is, He will be glorified by the Father. Stooping down He rises up, because His self-emptying is His glory and exaltation (cf. Phil 2:7, 9).

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Having considered Psalm 110 as a whole, let us now focus more closely on some of its key themes. First, the figure that appears before us in the psalm is the Eternal King and Priest. In so far as He is God, He is completely free and self-sufficient. He has no need of human beings, or of anything outside Himself, and this is a state of absolute sovereignty that testifies to His divinity. He is not like one of the idols of old, for they were false gods that needed the assistance of human beings in order to exist. The newborn child, on the other hand, who appears so powerless, is none other than the all-powerful God.

Second, let us consider the way in which the psalmist speaks

19. For additional comments on this verse, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 174-176.

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about the divinity of Christ. He does not try to coerce us into belief. What we believe is a matter of indifference to him. He simply announces a fact: the one addressed in the psalm is a priest, a king, and my God (cf. Ps 145:1). There is no need of any further explanation. If you so wish, believe in Him; if not, don't believe. In either case, He remains the Eternal King, seated upon His throne. If you so wish, offer Him your heart, for we encounter God in faith, in the spacious freedom of the heart. The Lord does not approach us in order to sway us with arguments and theories. He approaches us in order to enter our hearts. He is so infinitely great as to be beyond comprehension, and yet at the same time He is so close, so near to hand, like an intimate acquaintance, just as He is with the psalmist. David sees Him on His royal throne and in His priestly dignity; he sees Him drink from the brook in a manner that is so real, so tangible, as to constitute a living experience for him. And this experience is his response to the Word of God. «God comes to me and I respond to Him experientially by sharing in His life, by participating in His divinity» – thus might David speak about Christ.

David describes what he has seen. «Look! There He is! He is descending from His chariot in order to drink the water of humanity. Now He is born and enters the world in bodily form!» Christ is with the psalmist in all the circumstances of his life, and the psalmist, for his part, participates in the life of Christ. And this is why David does not look for logical proofs or arguments, for such are not needed in the face of what one sees and experiences as a living reality. The psalmist's inner assurance reveals that the Lord is not an object of external investigation or of ordinary human perception, but rather a divine person to be encountered and known in a living experience.

We saw, in the third place, that the Lord's reign is marked by

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ceaseless combat. Those who hate the Son are many, for they hate the truth, but their hatred is powerless against Him. Why? Because the Father fights for Him. All those who take up arms against Him will surely be crushed: that is the prophecy. To launch a war against the Invincible is of course utter foolishness (cf. Ps 14:1). Your defeat is certain. So too is it foolishness to live a lie. Truth, however, makes a wonderful ally, for to live the truth is to share in the life of Christ.

Fourth, the prophet presents us both with Christ's power and the participation of the saints in His glory. A saint is a witness who reveals God. Often we think about holiness as something distant, something separate from ourselves. Holiness is not something that has shaken us to the depths of our being, and most of us would have little trouble imagining our lives without it. And even if we don't deny the reality of holiness outright, we are usually so preoccupied with worldly matters, so inundated with various cares and concerns, that we don't even think about it. And when we do think about holiness, we will acknowledge it politely, with a certain measure of respect, without however undertaking a serious struggle to acquire it for ourselves. We don't feel a need for it in our lives. And yet holiness is the sign — the proof — of the glory of God. If I truly want the Lord to be victorious in this chaotic and confused world, then I must struggle continually to be sanctified, to live a life of holiness.

In Psalm 110, the Lord appears on the one hand as the Head of the Church, and on the other as its body (cf. Eph 1:22; Col 1:18). His majesty is the majesty of the Church, and His Church marches forward in triumph. But do I live my life rejoicing in the majesty of the Church? Am I filled with Her glory? Am I living in the light of Her love? Is Her life my life? Is the Church my Christ?

Christ bends down to the brook. He stoops down to my mor-

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tal, foolish, and exhausted heart, which one moment is exalted to the skies and the next sinks down to the depths of hell. Nevertheless Christ bends down to my heart in order to unite Himself to it, and so I too must turn toward Him. He descends. I must rise up. I must lift up my heart. *Wake from your sleep, rise from the dead, and you will touch Christ* (cf. Eph 5:14).<sup>20</sup> He is descending, coming down to meet you. You, for your part, must get up: wake up from your sleep. Do not remain among the dead, among those whose existence is but a semblance of life. Rise up and you will *touch Christ*; you will draw near to Him, and embrace Him. You will experience His presence as something palpably real. You will experience His life as your own. You are the brook and He is God: heaven and earth, God and man, together. This is what happened when *the Word became flesh* (cf. Jn 1:14). This is what we celebrate on the day of the Nativity, the day when Christ was born. This is what must take place within our heart. *We were in travail as if with child, and have given birth* (Is 26:18). Let Christ be born within you. Let your soul become the point of contact between heaven and earth.

Another version of verse 3 presents us with a striking image: «Your people shall come forth freely on the day of Your battle».<sup>21</sup> The people of God, upon hearing the sound of the trumpet – the call to war – in the middle of the night, before the break of dawn, rise and run freely, voluntarily, to the side of their king. And the

20. This is a variant reading of Ephesians 5:14, which in most editions of the New Testament says: «Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light».

21. The literal sense of the Hebrew here (which is just two words), is «your-people, acts-of-volunteering», a phrase associated elsewhere with volunteering for battle, as in the «Song of Deborah»: «My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people» (Jg 5:9).



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people are innumerable, like endless «drops of dew», appearing everywhere in the light of the dawn.<sup>22</sup> According to some interpreters, this is a reference to young people. Christ's armies are composed of young men and women, who voluntarily sacrifice themselves as soon as they hear the sound of the trumpet. They are innumerable, filled with energy, like fresh drops of dew, filling all creation. Will we not take our place beside them? Will we delay? Will we be absent from the myriads of young people arrayed in sacred vestments? Will we not share in their desire to be conquered by God? Certainly not. The trumpet is sounding: we are called.

22. The imagery of «dew» is derived from the Hebrew of verse 3, which says «from the womb of the dawn, the dew of your youth [or «young men»] will come to you», or «yours is the dew of youth» (the words «I have begotten You» depend on a difference in vocalization). The image is thus of an assembly at dawn mustering volunteers for war.



## Psalm 88 (LXX 87)

An ode of a psalm for the sons of Korah. For the end: concerning the response of *maeleth*, for the giving of understanding to Haiman the Israelite.

- 2 O Lord God of my salvation,  
    *by day I have cried out,*  
    *and in the night before You.*
- 3 Let my prayer come before You;  
    *incline Your ear to my supplication,*
- 4 For my soul is filled with evils,  
    *and my life has drawn near to Hades.*
- 5 I am numbered with them that go down into the pit;  
    *I have become like a man without help,*  
    *free among the dead,*
- 6 Like the slain that sleep in the grave,  
    *whom You no longer remember,*  
    *and were rejected by Your hand.*
- 7 They put me in a very deep pit,  
    *in dark places, and in the shadow of death.*
- 8 Your wrath has pressed heavily upon me,  
    *and You have afflicted me with all your breaking waves.   selah*
- 9 You distanced my friends from me;  
    *they have made me an abomination to themselves.*  
    *I have been handed over, and I cannot get out.*
- 10 My eyes have grown weak on account of my poverty,  
    *But I cried out to You, O Lord, the whole day long;*  
    *I stretched out my hands to You.*

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- 11 *Will You work wonders for the dead?  
Or shall physicians raise them up,  
so that they may give thanks to You?*
- 12 *Will anyone declare Your mercy in the grave,  
and Your truth in that perdition?*
- 13 *Will Your wonders be known in that darkness,  
and Your righteousness in that land of oblivion?*
- 14 *As for me, I cried out to You, O Lord;  
and in the morning my prayer shall come before You.*
- 15 *Why, O Lord, do You cast off my soul,  
and turn Your face away from me?*
- 16 *I am poor and in troubles from my youth,  
and having been exalted, I was humbled and became perplexed.*
- 17 *The outbursts of Your wrath have swept over me,  
and Your terrors have greatly troubled me,*
- 18 *They surround me like water all day long,  
they close in on me completely.*
- 19 *You distanced friend and neighbor from me,  
and my acquaintances because of my wretchedness.<sup>1</sup>*

\*

\*   \*

When we consider the various clusters of psalms that mark the services of the Hours, and above all the «Six Psalms» that are read every day at Matins, the distinctive role played by the Psalter in Orthodox worship becomes clear. Many of these psalms have a

1. The Hebrew concludes with the abrupt and rather grim statement: «My only friend is darkness», and so the psalm closes with the theme of darkness that has dominated throughout; cf. below, n. 25.

#### PSALM EIGHTY EIGHT

pensive, mournful character, and give expression to the soul's pain and suffering. At the same time, these psalms alternate with others that abound with ardent longing for the Lord, and so express the soul's love and desire for the Savior.

Of the «Six Psalms», the first two – Psalms 3 and 38 – are psalms of sorrow. They give voice to the agony of the soul drowning in the depths of despair, sickness, and especially in sin, which is the greatest, indeed the only, catastrophe of human existence.<sup>2</sup> Also mournful is Psalm 88, which is the first of the second group of three psalms that make up the «Six Psalms». The remaining psalms – 62, 102 and 142 – are different. They are animated by an exhilarating passion for God. They express, moreover, not simply the psalmist's anticipation or expectation of God, but indeed his very *acquisition* of God. We know from experience that it is not possible to draw near to God, still less to make Him your own, without a struggle, and so I thought we should look at Psalm 88, which is unique in the Psalter for its vivid description of the soul's painful wrestling with God.

By way of contrast, think for a moment of Psalm 137, which describes the people of Israel *weeping by the rivers of Babylon* (Ps 137:1), and asking the Lord *to remember the sons of Edom* (Ps 137:7). Even though this psalm is about the sufferings of a nation dragged off into cruel exile, it nonetheless looks forward to

2. See St. John Chrysostom, Letter to Olympias 7.1: «There is only thing in life that is truly terrible, namely, for a person to commit sin; and I shall never tire of telling you this» (SC 13b: 134); and id., Letter to Olympias 9.4: «I have not ceased, nor shall I cease, from singing to you this, my song: in life there is only one source of sorrow, namely, sin; all other 'sorrows' are but smoke and dust» (234), a theme Chrysostom develops further in his *Letter from Exile* (SC 103).

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the final restoration of the *sons of Edom* (cf. Gen 25:24-30; Ezek 25:12-14, 35). Thus from the depths of despair, a herald of future happiness rings forth. But here, in Psalm 88, we hear no such happy tidings. Psalm 88 is an expression of unmitigated sorrow, a cry of unspeakable grief, a howl heard in the darkness.

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An ode of a psalm for the sons of Korah. For the end: concerning the response of *maeleth*, for the giving of understanding to Haiman the Israelite.

In editions of the Psalter intended for liturgical use, the titles of the psalms are almost never included. But that's like a body without the head.<sup>3</sup> We should therefore try, as much as we can, to familiarize ourselves with these titles (which are also called «inscriptions») so that we might have a better idea of what follows.

«An ode of a psalm». Here the word «ode» indicates that the

3. Some ancient interpreters, notably from the Antiochene tradition, believed that these titles were the work of later editors who reassembled the Book of Psalms after it had been lost in the Babylonian captivity. These editors had to guess at the historical settings of the various psalms, and so made many mistakes, according to Diodore of Tarsus, *On the Psalms* (CCSG 6:6). However, the ancient tradition of the Church held that these titles were the work of the Holy Spirit, and stood on the same level as the rest of Sacred Scripture. This is the view of Western writers such as Hippolytos, Hilary, Jerome, and Augustine; and of Origen, Eusebios, Athanasios, Didymos, Gregory of Nyssa, Evagrius, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Hesychios of Jerusalem in the East. Of these latter, Athanasios and Gregory wrote works dedicated specifically to the titles of the psalms (PG 27:649-1344; GNO 5:24-175).

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text before us is a poem, which in this case has the character of a narrative. Its subject is the story of a nation, or of a particular soul, whose dramatic experiences are described in the psalm. The word «psalm» is derived from the verb «to play on the *psaltery*», which was a kind of harp-like instrument, and so tells us that the singing of the psalms was accompanied by a melody played on a stringed instrument, and often by an entire musical ensemble. Thus, in addition to narrative history –the epic struggle of the soul– we also have lyric poetry and music; a lyrical poem unfolding in a musical framework.<sup>4</sup>

«For the sons of Korah». This phrase gives us the sense that this psalm must be an important one, a kind of classic among the psalms. The psalms associated with the «sons of Korah» (Psalms 84-85, 87-88) are among the most beautiful in the entire Psalter. Notwithstanding the terrible punishment that was unleashed on the family of Korah after it had risen up against Moses and Aaron (Num 16:1-50), its descendents served God at the altar and became important figures in the history of Israel (1 Chr 9:19).<sup>5</sup>

4. These terms are based on a division of poetry into epic, dramatic, and lyrical forms. Psalm 88 combines the narrative elements of epic with the expression of subjective experiences and feelings characteristic of lyric poetry. (The strict «dramatic» form requires the staging of characters, dialogue, and action.) These generic categories (and there are others) are sometimes useful, but the hybrid form of Psalm 88 and many other psalms should alert us to their limitations.

5. A descendant of Levi (cf. Ex 6:21; Num 16:1), Korah led a rebellion against Moses, challenging the subordination of the Levites to the Aaronite order, as a result of which the rebels were killed when the earth broke open and «swallowed them up with all their families and goods» (Num 16:32). Korah's sons survived, however, and were later reconciled to Moses and Aaron (Num 26:9-10).

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Haiman the Israelite, who is also mentioned in the title, is in fact the author of this psalm (cf. 1 Chr 2:6; 15:17).

The next phrase, «for the end», also indicates that this psalm is of special significance, since it points to the end of the period of the Old Testament, anticipating the birth of Christ, or His Second Coming. In each instance, it expresses something of great importance, namely, the manifestation of God in time.<sup>6</sup>

The phrase «concerning the response of *maeleth*» can be said to round out and complete the two preceding phrases. It seems that the *maeleth* (or *mahalath*) was the particular instrument upon which the psalm was to be played, and which was capable of producing deep, mournful sounds. But it may also be a reference to a certain type of dirge or lament. We're not exactly sure. According to yet another interpretation, it indicates the presence of two choirs, as suggested by the phrase 'concerning the response,' that is, the antiphonal response of one choir to another, so that each choir extended and completed the lamentation of the other.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the phrase «for the giving of understanding» – or

6. The phrase «for the end» occurs as the title, or as part of the title, of fifty-five psalms, beginning with Psalm 4 and appearing for the last time in Psalm 139. Other Greek translations of the psalms render this phrase as: «For the one who gives victory» (Aquila), «Song of victory» (Symmachus), or «Unto victory» (Theodotion). With these variants in mind, St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.2, contends that the phrase signifies the victorious end of our earthly struggles for virtue, and the final triumph of good over evil (trans. R. Heine, 127-128).

7. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, suggests that «because the name *maeleth* indicates a choral dance», it aims to «stir the spiritual athlete to greater zeal, since it indicates the festivities that await us when our struggles are over» (trans. R. Heine, 128).



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«instruction», as it is sometimes translated – indicates that this is a «didactic» psalm. But it also signifies the gift of divine grace, which is frequently called «understanding», and which in more precise theological terms we call «discernment».<sup>8</sup> From a psalm such as this, then, one rightly expects to find depths of spiritual meaning, and this is true of virtually all the psalms containing the word «understanding» in their titles.<sup>9</sup> Such depths are not easy to penetrate, for they have what Saint Paul calls both «natural» and «spiritual» meanings.<sup>10</sup> In order for someone to understand «spiritual» meanings, he must be ushered into the realm of the Spirit, his heart must be cultivated by the grace of God; he must be given the gift of «understanding», otherwise he will remain on the surface, limited to mere letters, understanding only the superficial meaning of the words (cf. 2 Cor 3:6).

8. In the Old Testament, «understanding» (σύνεσις) is frequently linked with «wisdom», and both are associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as in Exodus 31:3, where the craftsman Bezalel is «filled with the Spirit of God, and with wisdom and understanding» (cf. Job 15:2; Pr 4:5; Col 1:9). In Isaiah 11:2, «understanding» appears among the «seven gifts» of the Holy Spirit: «The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord». To these six, the Septuagint adds «piety». Compare St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 7.1: «Let us praise God as wise and the source of all wisdom, or rather as transcending all wisdom and understanding, for not only is God so filled with wisdom that *His understanding is beyond measure* (Ps 147:5), but he transcends all reason, all intelligence, and all wisdom» (PG 3:865B).

9. These are Psalms 32, 42-45, 52-54, 78, 88-89, 142.

10. A reference to 1 Corinthians 2:14: «The natural (ἡνυχιστός) man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned» (cf. 1 Cor 15:44; Jas 3:15; Jud 19).

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Having touched on the psalm's historical context and the meaning of its title, which are among the more elusive elements in this cloud of grace (cf. Mt 17:5; Rev 1:7), let us proceed to the main body of the lament.

2 *O Lord God of my salvation,  
by day have I cried out,  
and in the night before You.*

3 *Let my prayer come before You;  
incline Your ear to my supplication.*

To be sure, the psalmist is in pain. But what is significant is that his vision is not riveted on his external circumstances, but on God, Who is both the object of his longing and the center of his sorrow. It may very well be God Who is inflicting this pain upon him, yet it is nonetheless from this same God that he awaits his deliverance.

*O Lord God of my salvation.* Here the pronoun «my» ultimately refers to the word «Lord», so that the heart of the psalmist's cry is «my Lord».<sup>11</sup> As such it reveals his personal bond with the Lord and not the rising tragedy, which threatens to inundate him with sorrows. «*O Lord God of my salvation*, You alone are before my eyes, and it is from You alone that I can hope for my deliverance; it is to You alone that I address my whole life». The waves dash against him, and yet he continues to stand before God.

11. This is the first invocation of the Tetragrammaton (YHWH) in this psalm, and three others will follow (vv. 10, 14, 15). It is striking that, in the Hebrew, the name of God moves backward in the sequence of words each time, so that the increasing distance of God from the psalmist, the «turning away» of God's face (v. 15), is literally put into words.

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*By day I have cried out and in the night before You.* He has *cried out* during the *day* on account of his pain, and *in the night* on account of his desire to search more penetratingly in the hope of finding God, so that he might speak with Him and pour forth to Him all that troubles and torments him. Here the use of the verb *I have cried out* in the perfect tense does not simply refer to an event that has taken place in the past. It does not, in other words, carry merely a quantitative, temporal signification, but has a qualitative one as well, since it indicates an action that was so thoroughly and completely performed that it continues to have consequences for the present—it was, to be sure, an action performed in the past— but it continues to mark the present in the way that all important experiences do. This is not, then, simply the temporal aspect of a verb or action, but something much more special, for it exposes a network of living roots stretching back to the past and running through to the present.

*By day I have cried out and in the night before You.* The psalmist has *cried out by day*, since each day holds out new hopes, and again *in the night*, since the night encompasses all things and enables one to feel and so to know that tomorrow, at last, my Lord shall come (cf. Wis 18:14-15).<sup>12</sup>

*Let my prayer come before You.* The psalmist speaks as if God were nowhere to be seen, as if He were enclosed behind walls, which the psalmist seeks to breach by means of his voice.<sup>13</sup> «I am not asking that you receive me, my God; and though You are the sole point of reference for my existence, let me not be the focus of Your concern. Accept, however, my prayer, which I place before You, within the sight of Your eyes. You live behind lofty walls, behind doors through

12. See above, Psalm 63:1 (chap. 1).

13. The Hebrew says «Let my petition come before Your face» in a manner that alludes to the language of a royal audience.

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which no man may pass, and which I myself am incapable of even opening. But grant that my prayer, like a rising breath, might reach You. Thick clouds conceal You, but let my voice cut through them, ascending through the veil that stands between us. As for me, let me abide here on earth, to suffer countless agonies in impenetrable darkness: only let my voice rise up and resound before you».

*Incline Your ear to my supplication.* It is as if the psalmist's voice is straining with all its power to draw near to God, while God Himself is beyond the range of hearing, withdrawn and remote. And so the psalmist says: «Bend down to me, incline Your whole being to me, listen to what I am saying!» But God refuses; He does not respond. For the ancient Israelites, it was impossible to imagine that God was somehow incapable of hearing, as a result of which even God's silence was understood as something that came forth from God. Affirmation and negation are equally from God. The same God who gave grace to Moses *hardened the heart of Pharaoh* (Ex 4:21).

4 *For my soul is filled with evils,  
and my life has drawn near to Hades.*

If, on the one hand, God has removed Himself from the psalmist's hearing, withdrawing into the inscrutable heights of heaven, the psalmist is bound to his own course of movement, falling earthward, descending, lost in the darkness of the abyss. *For my soul is filled with evils.* According to Biblical tradition, the soul, which is the source of bodily life, is said to be *in the blood* (Lev 17:11; Dt 12:23; cf. Gen 9:5), and consequently expresses the deepest aspects of human existence.<sup>14</sup> If, then, *my soul is filled with evils*, it means that my entire

14. Origen considers Leviticus 17:11 in his *Dialogue with Heraclides* 10.20-24.24, and responds by relating St. Paul's doctrine of the «inner man» (Rom

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inner world, my entire existence, is replete with catastrophes; I am crushed, destroyed, blackened like so much scorched earth. For the ancient Israelites, the greatest catastrophe was sin, which was the root of all evil and suffering. A long and happy life was the reward of righteous deeds (cf. Pr 9:10-11), but sufferings were believed to be caused by sin. Thus the psalmist is saying that he is completely immersed in sin, submerged in the depths of all its wretchedness.

*And my life has drawn near to Hades.* «Hades» is a place of unrelieved darkness, into which the soul descends broken and bereft of all hope. Reading this verse is like watching a man die, taking his last breath, arriving at the very mouth of Hades, about to plunge into the abyss, when suddenly we hear him cry out to God: «If You do not make haste to rescue me, I will have no hope of salvation. This is the end. Save me!» But whereas the agonized psalmist cries out desperately to God, God seems to withdraw still further, remaining silent, inscrutable, lost beyond the infinite heights of the clouds.

*5 I am numbered with them that go down into the pit;  
I have become like a man without help,  
free among the dead,*

Let us attend carefully to this image. It's as if we're following hard on the footsteps of someone who has arrived, not only at the brink of the abyss and the very door of death, but who is lost in hell's labyrinths. *I am numbered with them that go down into the pit.*<sup>15</sup>

7:22; 2 Cor 4:16; Col 3:9-10), to the doctrine that man is «created according to the image of God» (Gen 2:7), and thus every part of the body (St. Paul's «outer man»), including the blood, has its analogue to a deeper, spiritual reality (ACW 54:65-76).

15. See St. Basil of Caesarea, *On Psalm 7*: «He has opened a pit and dug it (Ps 7:16). We do not find the name of 'pit' (λάζκος) ever assigned in the

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«Do you not see, my God, where my feet have taken me? Were You even now to start running, You would barely arrive in time to rescue me. The dismal, sinking sounds of my footsteps fill me with horror as I draw nearer by degrees to death. The living, who have not yet come to this place, can hear my footsteps, and they know that for me there is no return. *I have become like a man without help.* They are incapable of helping me; they know it is hopeless. They have abandoned me. To them I am already dead. And all the while my feet carry me inexorably forward, down into Hades. As for the dead, they too can hear my footsteps, and they know that I am already reckoned as one of their *number*. Has not the sound of my feet echoed in their dark halls? Then it is finished. I am dead. And You, God, remain silent, remote, concealed behind clouds».

And just as this journey into death is about to fade from our sight; just as the final sounds of his footsteps fade away and are lost forever, we hear yet another cry from the depths: *I have become like a man without help; free among the dead.* «The living have despaired of me, given up. Those that await me below are bound fast, immovable in their bonds. They are not able to help me. How could they, when they cannot even help themselves? Thus I am *without help*. And what is worse, I am *free among the dead*». What does this mean? Imagine that you were caught in the grip of some vast, terrible agony; as if all hope was gone and your whole world had fallen to pieces. You would initially be in a state

Divine Scriptures in the case of something good. That into which Joseph was thrown by his brother is a 'pit' (Gen 37:24). And there was a slaughter *from the firstborn of Pharaoh unto the firstborn of the slave woman in the pit* (Ex 12:29). And in the psalms it says, *I am numbered with them that go down into the pit* (Ps 88:5). And in Jeremiah it says, *they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and have dug a pit for themselves* (Jer 2:13). Moreover, Daniel is placed in a 'pit' with lions (Dan 6)» (FOTC 46:179).

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of shock, at a total loss, with no idea what was going on. But then you would regain your senses and realize that you were still free, but free like someone in prison. You're able to move around, but the walls of the prison cut you off from the rest of the world. You are cut off, stranded, exiled, isolated from other human beings. This is what it means to be *free among the dead*. I am alive, but I live among the dead. It's as if we've all been sentenced to death, and the executioner has already come, and is now pointing his machine gun at me; I'm still standing, but those who were with me have already fallen, and now it's my turn. But for the moment, I am «free», although such freedom does me little good, for it allows me only to be conscious of my terrible situation, of the extreme danger and chaos into which I have descended.<sup>16</sup>

*I have become as a man without help; free among the dead.* To be sure, this verse is also a prophecy. All the psalms are in some way a prophecy. And since the phrase «for the end» appears in the psalm's title, we may follow readily the interpretation of those

16. The difficult phrase «free among the dead» has posed problems for interpreters both ancient and modern, some of whom see it merely as a metaphor or a kind of euphemism; see, for example, Theodoret of Kyrrhos, who argues that it means «freedom from the rituals of death», since the speaker is «dead» without having actually died or received burial (PG 80:1569). However, the Church Fathers recognized that this verse was primarily a prophetic reference to Christ; compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 88*: «Only Christ is *free among the dead*, for He alone is without sin» (PG 27:380); St. Epiphanius, *Ancoratus*: «Christ is *free among the dead* for Hades had no power over him» (GCS 25:34); Ps.-Gregory of Nyssa, *Biblical Testimonies*: «Who is *free among the dead* if not God? For it was He who became man, and *humbled his flesh to death, even death on a cross* (cf. Phil 2:8)» (PG 46:216). The same interpretation is found in a letter by St. Cyril of Alexandria that was included in the proceedings of the Council of Ephesus, thereby receiving the approval of an Ecumenical Council (ACO I,1,4.44).

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Church Fathers who see the words *free among the dead* as having been spoken by the Lord. It's as if He were saying, «I have been put to death, but not contrary to my own will; I died freely, in the way that I chose to die, and because I chose to die. I was not handed over, but I handed myself over (cf. Jn 10:17-18). And my glory is precisely the fact that I gave myself freely to death».

6 *Like the slain that sleep in the grave,  
whom You no longer remember,  
and were rejected by Your hand.*

7 *They put me in a very deep pit,  
in dark places, and in the shadow of death.*

These words give expression to a long, terrible fall; to the relentless effacement of a life, as experienced by the psalmist and observed by those around him. *Like the slain that sleep in the grave*. Just a moment ago, we heard the sound of his footsteps, fading away in the depths of Hades. Now he is asleep among the dead, with no hope of escape or return to the land of the living. Before him is the God of his salvation, but the psalmist confronts him without hope, without any belief in resurrection, with no mention of any other life. He is sleeping among the dead, for he has died. According to the Hebrew text, this is the voice of a man who has suffered a fatal blow on the battlefield.<sup>17</sup> His blood streams forth from his veins,

17. This interpretation is suggested by the Hebrew word for «slain», which literally means «impaled» or «speared», cf. Judges 9:40; 1 Chronicles 5:22; and Ezekiel 32:24-25: «All the slain that fell by the sword and... go down to the depths of the earth». Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 7.75.3, likewise speaks of the «wounded, slain, and unburied». It has been



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he staggers about on wobbly legs, his eyes do not see clearly, he has no hope, and all that he feels is the pain from the sword that has passed through his body. It would be better to be dead than to live with a sword having passed through one's heart. I consider this interpretation to be much more powerful.

*Whom You no longer remember; and were rejected by Your hand.*

Here the psalmist speaks directly to God, as if now he were seeing, not the spectacle of his own personal tragedy, but God Himself, to Whom he entrusts himself wholly, although with no hope of deliverance. If God does not remember these fallen dead, who else will call them to mind? «If the dead are shunned and removed from human society, how much more so will I be disregarded and ignored? For they, at least, have died, but I continue to suffer. Somehow I am still alive, if only barely, yet You disdain me as if I were already a corpse, and thus I am mocked by Your silence».

*They were rejected by Your hand.* With these words the psalmist refers to the personal activity of God, and so expresses anguish over his despair. «You, O God, have not simply forgotten me, but You have deliberately chosen to reject me, and so I have no hope. Yet I continue to speak to You. With Your hand you signaled for me to depart; You shook it at me, saying 'Go away, be gone.' You have cast me off, and sent me far away».

Do you see how deeply the psalmist experiences his distance from God? How profoundly he experiences loneliness and isolation in the absence of God? This is in fact the most profound thing that a person can experience, namely, being cut off from

suggested that the «slain» of Psalm 88:6 are those who fell in the capture of Jerusalem, so that the tragedy of death is compounded by the lack of a proper burial, a fitting image for the sense of total abandonment felt by the psalmist.

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God and neighbors and subsequently becoming acutely conscious of this separation, this isolation.

*They put me in a very deep pit, in dark places, and in the shadow of death.* Confronted with the specter of death and the underworld, the psalmist seeks to describe his experience, but death remains a mystery. In the abyss of his despair, he imagines himself buried in a pit, with the darkness covering him like a shroud; as if a bird of ill omen were hovering over his life, casting the shadow of death across his face. It is under such a shadow that he now lives. And even if it were possible for this bird to fly away, it would surely return and cover him with its terrible darkness. Yet what choice does he have but to try and overcome his anguish, to turn both his thoughts and his gaze toward God? And so he turns, without hope. But he turns. For it is God Who is the source of his very breath, Who gives meaning to his life, Who is his only point of reference.

8 *Your wrath has pressed heavily upon me,  
and You have afflicted me with all your breaking waves.* selah

Not seeing anything else that might give him hope, he turns to God, hopelessly hoping that He might hear him. And it is then that he senses that the evil is increasing. *Your wrath has pressed heavily upon me* (cf. Ps 38:2). «Your hand, which is the expression of Your powerful, weighty anger—of the speed with which You have forsaken me—this hand, I say, which has struck me many times in my life, has now come to rest upon me in a way that is definitive and complete, for now You have crushed my face into the ground, holding me there relentlessly with all Your terrible might. If, perhaps, You removed Your hand from me, only to raise it in order to strike me, I might perhaps hope that You would tire and stop this torture. But Your hand presses on me relentlessly and with overwhelming force».

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*And You have afflicted me with all your breaking waves.* The psalmist sees the sustained wrath of God like a series of waves rising up around him and crashing down on his head (cf. Ps 42:7).<sup>18</sup> «For me, You are the *Lord of my salvation* (Ps 38:22), but who am I to You? It matters to me what You think about me, how You see me. You have forgotten all the others; I alone exist for You, and so Your implacable gaze, Your irresistible hand, has fallen heavily on me. You alone exist for me, yet I cannot see You or experience Your help. I alone am the object of Your wrath; I alone am pounded into the ground by all your waves. If there were others, perhaps there might be some relief for me, perhaps the blows would be fewer, the pain spread around. But that is out of the question. All Your wrath has turned against me. You are my salvation, yet it is against me that You turn with all Your vehement power».

Here follows the «selah», which most probably marks the place for some sort of change in the choirs, related to the antiphonal singing, suggested by the information in the title concerning the *maeleth*, which we mentioned a moment ago.<sup>19</sup> It may also be a

18. As in many other psalms, the descent into the underworld is equated with drowning beneath the waves of the sea, compare below, verse 18; cf. Evagrius, *On Psalm 88*: «By *breaking waves* the psalmist means the violent judgment that came so fiercely and with such swiftness on the human race on account of the fall; it also signifies death» (*BEIIEΣ* 80:172).

19. Though there is general agreement that the word «selah» (Greek: *diapsalma*) is a liturgical direction calling for an instrumental interlude at this point in the singing of the psalm, there is no way of determining its meaning or etymology. Origen confessed that the *diapsalma* puzzled him, and that his extensive research on the matter yielded no clear answer (PG 12:1057). Eusebios believed it signaled important changes in the psalm (PG 23:1124; cf. PG 23:76), such as those suggested by St. Athanasios: «a musical interlude, a

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rubric calling for a musical interlude, after which the other choir responds and says:

9 *You distanced my friends from me;  
they have made me an abomination to themselves.  
I have been handed over, and I cannot get out.*

«Since all the others have been lost, and nothing else remains but You, I turn round and look back; I glance about to see if by chance there might be something else. But looking around, all that I am able to perceive is that the abyss into which I have fallen continues to expand and overwhelm me. Even my *acquaintances* have abandoned me, but in fact it was You Who did this. You took no thought to help me, only to isolate me still further. *You distanced my friends from me; they have made me an abomination*

change of key or rhythm, or else a change in the meaning of the psalm» (PG 27:69B), which was also the view of St. Hippolytos: «The *diapsalma* marks a change in rhythm, tone, melody, or a change of location of the choirs within the Temple, or a shift in the meaning of the text» (GCS 1.2, frg. 13); cf. St. Maximos: «I think the *diapsalma* indicates a change in the meaning of the psalm, or else a change in the manner of teaching, from one mode to another» (PG 90:800B). Given the inspired character of Scripture, such changes could be ascribed to the Holy Spirit: cf. Theodoret: «the *diapsalma* indicates a pause in the activity of the Holy Spirit, or a change in prophetic meaning, or simply in the melody» (PG 80:864A); and St. Cyril of Alexandria: «The *diapsalma* marks David's alteration of the music in his responsiveness to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit» (PG 69:725B). In his work *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, St. Gregory of Nyssa contends that the order of the psalms as a whole constitutes a ladder to virtue, and since *diapsalma* occur much more frequently in the earlier psalms, he concludes that the Spirit interrupts more frequently on the lower levels of the ladder (R. Heine, 18).

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to themselves.<sup>20</sup> True, for a while they stood by me, they came to comfort me, they wept with me, like the friends of Job (Job 2:11-13),<sup>21</sup> but in the end they grew weary with me, they got tired of my problems, and so now they keep away. And now, seeing me turned toward You, all they can do is *abominate* me, dismissing me as something deserving only of their scorn and loathing. *They have made me an abomination to themselves*, and so they despise me, and off in the distance I can see them mocking me».

*I have been handed over, and I cannot get out.* «I have been given over to my own wretchedness, to my despair, to my bitter disillusionment, to my empty, disenchanted world. I have entered into my prison. Since You no longer exist for me, I look again and see that I am *free among the dead*. I am closed in behind high walls. I am in my cell of solitary confinement. I am rotting away in a leper colony.<sup>22</sup> I no longer entertain any hopes of being able to escape or otherwise leave this place. I have fallen inextricably into your trap. I am ensnared, hopelessly entangled in your net, and I shall never speak again».

20. Here the Greek presents grammatical difficulties; the Hebrew says «You made me an abomination to them», thereby making God the subject, which fits well with the general context.

21. Compare Job 19:13, 15: «My brethren have distanced themselves from me... They who saw me reckoned me an abomination». This is one of many verbal and other parallels between Psalm 88 and Job, which have encouraged some interpreters to ascribe both to a common author (a connection strengthened by Job's «festered sores», often said to be leprosy, see below, n. 22).

22. The image of a «leper colony» resonates with the Hebrew of verse 5, where the adjective *hofshi* («free») occurs in 2 Kings 15:5, where it refers to the place of quarantine in which lepers are segregated (cf. Lev 13:46; 2 Kg 7:3). Some modern interpreters consequently argue that the psalmist is in fact suffering from leprosy, but such an interpretive reduction to physical illness is not adequate to the text, which makes no actual reference to any kind of sickness.

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Having been disappointed by God and man, there remains nothing for the psalmist to do but contemplate his abject wretchedness.

10 *My eyes have grown weak on account of my poverty, but  
I cried out to You, O Lord, the whole day long;  
I stretched out my hands to You.*

With his eyes engulfed by the sight of the abyss, he feels his vision growing dim, weak, about to fail.<sup>23</sup> With the torrents of tears that his pain and suffering have called forth; in the anguish of his poverty, his eyes have lost their power: he is going blind. *My eyes have grown weak on account of my poverty.* It's as if he were saying, «the only thing that existed for me, the only thing that I lived for, was God. You, O God, were my only happiness, but now my eyes fail me in the face of my wretchedness. The very thing that was my hope has become my death. What had been the source of my entire life has become a death sentence, with no hope of appeal. The One Whom I loved, it was He Who did this to me, He who killed me, leaving me here for dead. And now my eyes are failing me, and all I can see is my own misery, my wretchedness. With my own eyes I behold my executioner. But nonetheless *I cried out to You, O Lord, the whole day long; I stretched out my hands to You.* You remain all that I have, a distant tremulous light in my darkness».

11 *Will You work wonders for the dead?  
Or shall physicians raise them up,  
so that they may give thanks to You?*

The psalmist, confronting the One Whose ears have been closed to him, and knowing that He is his Lord and God, can do nothing

23. On the «eye» as the medium for experiencing life and death, see Psalms 6:8; 13:4; 19:9.

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else but pour out his heart to Him in complaint: «For Your sake my eyes have melted, they have withered within their sockets. What else do You want? For me to die? Of what profit will that be to You? What will I gain by death? What can I expect to await me among the dead?» By crying out like this he endeavors to move God, to make Him mindful of His majesty in such a way that God feels compelled to rescue the him. «I have no hope; but who knows? If You so wish it, all things are possible. I myself don't see how, but You do».

*Will You work wonders for the dead?* «What benefit can You be to the dead? They are no longer alive. *You are the God of wonders, the great God* (cf. Ps 8:1; Dan 9:4). So why are You just sitting there? Do something wondrous». As we know, the ancient Israelites did not have a developed belief in an afterlife; they entertained no great hopes for life after death. If the dead existed anywhere, it was in a place of darkness.

*Or shall physicians raise them up, so that they may give thanks to You?* «Do you have the idea, O God, that after I'm dead, doctors will be able to bring me back to life, and then I shall glorify You and declare Your greatness? In fact, my praises will be buried with me; my songs to You covered by the tomb. Who then will know that You are wondrous? If You want Your glory to be made known, acknowledged and marveled at, You need do no more than grant me life». According to the Hebrew text, this verse says: *Will You work wonders for the dead? Will the shades arise and acclaim you?* «Will the shadows of the dead be reunited with their bones, and their bones with their flesh? Will they then rise from the ground to praise You? (cf. Ezek 37:3-6). No. That is impossible. But now, right now, while I'm speaking to You, there is still time».

12 *Will any one declare Your mercy in the grave,  
and Your truth in that perdition?*

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«Indeed, not only will Your glory be tarnished, but You too will suffer embarrassment, for You will be made to appear as a fraud, a liar». It's like he's telling Him: «Be careful, my God, do not deceive us, for You must *be justified when You are judged* (Ps 51:4). And how will You be justified? When You show that Your mercy is true, and that Your truth, and Your faithfulness, are indeed real.

«You said that You have love, that You are rich in mercy, abounding in grace. But where is Your grace when You leave me to fall into the depths of Hades? Where is Your truth? You said that You would hear us, help us. You promised that when we cried out to You, when we called upon You, You would come to us. Can it be that Your heart is made of stone, that You are a liar? I certainly don't believe that, but if I die like this, that's exactly what they'll all say, and You will stand condemned. Do You see, then, God, how Your reputation, Your great glory, requires You to help me? Do You understand that, in order for Your honor to be preserved untarnished in the world, and for people to place their trust in You, I must be saved?»<sup>24</sup>

13 *Will Your wonders be known in that darkness,  
and Your righteousness in that land of oblivion?*

«If You really want to help me, You won't be able to do so when I'm rotting in the ground. In the darkness, one sees only shadows. Nothing is clear there; nothing can be made out distinctly or

24. This same argument was used by St. Gregory the Theologian, when as a young man and as yet unbaptized, he was caught in a storm on a ship: «If I escape a double danger (i.e., physical shipwreck and spiritual death apart from baptism) I shall live for You; if I am abandoned, You will lose a worshipper» (FOTC 75:82).



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properly acknowledged for what it is. It is only here, in the full light of day, that your *wonders* can be *made known*. *In that land of oblivion*, Your *righteousness* cannot be made manifest. Now is the time and here is the place for You to manifest *Your righteousness*». Despite these arguments, the Lord does not appear.

14 *As for me, I cried out to You, O Lord;  
and in the morning my prayer shall come before You.*

«Do You see why I cry out? I do so of course on my own behalf, but also for the sake of Your glory. *To You, O Lord, I cried*. Become once again my deliverer, my comfort, especially *in the morning*, when I experience moments of hope. When the sun rises, I have the hope that a new life will dawn for me.<sup>25</sup> This is the time of the morning sacrifice, when the peace offering is made to You (Lev

25. The rising of the sun symbolizes the metaphysical triumph of light over darkness, the victory of life over death, and the restoration of justice (cf. Mal 4:2). In the context of the Korahite psalms, Psalm 88 and Psalm 84 have common elements as well as contrasting themes, including those of darkness and light. Both psalms are the «prayers» (cf. 84:9; 88:3, 14) of a «soul» (cf. 84:3; 88:4, 15) that «longs and cries» (cf. 84:3; 88:2, 10, 14) for the vision of God (cf. 84:8; 88:3 [Hebrew: «Let my prayer come before Your *face*], 15), and to experience Him like «the sun» (84:11) that «in the morning» brings an end to darkness (Ps 88:14, in association with 7, 13). Perhaps more striking are the contrasts: whereas Psalm 88 describes a soul going from «strength to strength» (84:8), the soul in Psalm 88 loses all its strength (88:5 [Hebrew: «I have become like a man whose strength is exhausted»]); and Psalm 84's longing for the living God» (84:3), gives way in Psalm 88 to a cry from the realm of the dead. And whereas Psalm 88 is heavy with images of shadows, darkness, and dimming eyesight, Psalm 84 is animated by the idea that God «appears» or «lets Himself be seen» (84:8), and rises like the «sun» (84:12 [Hebrew: «The Lord is our sun and shield»]).

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7:11; Num 28:1-8). It is then that I take my *unleavened cakes*, my *unblemished sacrifice*, my *flour mingled with oil* (cf. Lev 2:1-8), and I offer them to You believing that, even though You are silent, even though You hide Yourself from me, *in the morning* You will hear me. *In the morning my prayer shall come before You*».

Consider the humility, but also the grandeur, of the psalmist, who desires to be seen by God. He does not dare of course even to say that he himself will appear before God, but asks only that his prayer might attain to God. «I am unworthy to present myself before You. Therefore accept my prayer, let it come before You, let it *reach You in the morning*». In a sense he personifies his prayer, as if it were something that he could send forth, and which could subsequently run and take flight, soaring aloft to the Lord, receiving divine help on his behalf. «Long before the morning sun will have reached its zenith, my prayer will have reached You. But as for me, Lord, will I ever reach You? Will I ever attain You? I shall remain in prayer all night long. All through the night I will search for you in the darkness. In the morning, that's where my prayer will be. It will have arrived. It will have reached You. That's what I will do. But what will *You* do, God? You appear to be in no particular hurry to do anything. You float along on some distant sea of tranquility. Even so, my prayer will reach You, it will stand before You, it will fall before Your feet. I myself, however, do not dare to do any such thing».

15 *Why, O Lord, do You cast off my soul,  
and turn Your face away from me?*

But as we have already seen there is no response, no confirmation, not a glimmer of hope, no experience of the nearness of God. On the contrary, the psalmist continues to feel the hand of God

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*rejecting him, pushing him away. Why, O Lord, do You cast off my soul? Why do You reject me?* A moment ago he said that God had rejected everyone, including himself. But now God has identified His prey, and so the psalmist feels even more intensely that he has fallen under divine retribution. Even so, he holds his ground; his commitment to God remains unshaken, as if the only thing that existed for him was God. «So why, then, *do You cast off my soul, and turn Your face away from me?*»

16 *I am poor and in troubles from my youth  
and having been exalted, I was humbled and became perplexed.*

«Can't you see, God, that my whole life I've been a nothing, ignored, in a state of anguish, living out my little life on a dung heap (Job 2:8) for as long as I can remember? I have not known even one day of happiness. None of Your promises has ever had any meaning for me. There were times when my heart felt light, when I had hope, when I felt comforted. However I was invariably *brought low and became perplexed*. Thus what few hopes I had have all come to nothing».

17 *The outbursts of Your wrath have swept over me,  
and Your terrors have greatly troubled me,*

«You are the *God of my salvation*, but I am a stormy sea over whose surface You calmly walk» (cf. Mt 14:25). This is how we think when we become isolated. When a man suffers, he thinks that no one suffers more than he does, that no one else has the kinds of problems that he does. Soon his sense of isolation deepens and reaches its climax: He *alone* suffers, no one else. And thus he says: «My God, You are unjust only to me. All of Your wrath, all of Your anger, are

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directed solely against me. *The outbursts of Your wrath have swept over me; and Your terrors have greatly troubled me.* Not only are You angry with me, not only have You rejected me, but I have become like something cast off and despised, a game for the amusement of Your idle moments, a weak little child for You to frighten».

With these words, the psalmist is expressing the thoughts of every soul that suffers. More precisely, he is describing the experience of suffering undergone by the soul. And this experience consists essentially of a conflict, for this is the moment when the soul is passing, as it were, through the «Clashing Rocks» of ancient mythology, known as the Symplegades.<sup>26</sup> In this dangerous passage, the soul has to make a choice, and the outcome will either break it into pieces or enable it to sail to its destination in God.<sup>27</sup> And the choice comes down to this: will the soul accept or reject suffering? Will it make this suffering its own, or struggle against it, seeing it as something alien to itself? To be sure, God exists. But the psalmist is overwhelmed by his suffering, and this is the cause of the whole drama. And so he has to make a choice. If he chooses to accept his suffering, he must embrace it within the wholeness of his life; he must discover and accept the proper relation to his suffering. If he can do this, he will have transformed his suffering so that in the end his only reality will be God. But if he continues to resist his suffering, refusing to find his salvation in it, his anguish

26. According to legend, these were rocks that guarded the entrance at the Bosphorus to the Black Sea, abruptly rushing together and crushing those ships that endeavored to pass. They ceased clashing altogether when Jason and the Argonauts succeeded in passing through them, famously described by Apollonios of Rhodes, *The Voyage of the Argo* 2.549-606.

27. The critical decision to accept or reject God is a recurring theme in the elder's teaching; see, for example, *The Way of the Spirit*, 8-12, 29.

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will continue unabated. The question is ultimately this: Will he offer himself as a voluntary sacrifice to the will of God, or not?<sup>28</sup>

Consistent with the witness of Scripture – which is so much more powerful and theologically accurate than the modern idea that God has no real relation to the world – the psalmist believes that God is acting tyrannically toward him. In the face of such a situation, what must the psalmist do? He must accept as his own will, as his own desire, the will of God for his life. If this happens, he will cease being anxious about his sufferings, for he will see that they too are the signs and tokens of God's presence.

It follows from this that the psalmist's salvation hinges on a single decision, namely, the acceptance or rejection of his suffering. To the extent that he struggles against his suffering, seeking to disown and reject it, his agony will only intensify. The avoidance of suffering serves only to increase suffering in a vicious cycle that never ends. If, on the other hand, he chooses to entrust himself to God, and so recognize in his suffering God's mercy and love; if he is able to see his suffering as the proof of God's love for him, then he will undergo another, greater experience that will shake him to the core of his being. Just when he thinks that his life is about to end, that he is about to breathe his last, he will feel, not simply an upward surge

28. Compare St. Makarios, *Spiritual Homilies* 1.6: «Of old it was necessary that the sacrifice first be killed by a priest. After it died, it was cut in pieces and seasoned with salt (cf. Lev 2:2; Mt 5:13), then placed on the fire. Unless the priest first kills the lamb, it is not salted nor is brought to the Lord as a burnt offering. Similarly also our soul must approach Christ the High Priest to be slain by Him and die to its own wicked thoughts and the wicked life which it was living, that is, to die to sin. Just as the body, after the soul has left it, is dead and no longer has life in it, so after Christ, the Heavenly High Priest, puts to death our life in the world, it dies to the life of corruption it formerly lived» (trans. G. Maloney, 40).

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into new life, but deep within himself the presence of the *long-lived seed* mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah: *It was the will of the Lord to bruise him; He has put him to grief; yet when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, a long-lived seed, and the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of his suffering of his soul and be satisfied* (Is 53:10). Spiritual health is not found in the avoidance of suffering, but in its joyful acceptance. The psalmist's dilemma lies precisely in whether or not he will accept his sufferings or reject them, which is another way of saying that the choice he needs to make is whether to accept or deny God.

18 *They surround me like water all day long,  
they close in on me completely.*

19 *You distanced friend and neighbor from me,  
and my acquaintances because of my wretchedness.*

At this point, there is a sense in which the natural continuation of Psalm 88 is to be found in the opening lines of Psalm 89, composed by «Ethan the Ezrahite».<sup>29</sup> The ancient Israelites read the psalms with great freedom, moving from one passage to another in accord with their inner moods and states of soul. Haiman and Ethan were brothers (cf. 1 Chr 2:6, 15:16-19) and wrote these two psalms in such

29. According to some modern interpreters, the «happy ending» found in Psalm 89, was in fact an organic part of Psalm 88, which has suffered the loss of its closing verses, although one wonders if this is simply an attempt to mitigate the hopeless suffering described in the text, a situation which is without parallel in the entire Book of Psalms. In its liturgical setting (as the fourth of the «Six Psalms»), the second and third verses of Psalm 88 are repeated at the psalm's conclusion, and thus the psalm is made to close on a note of hopeful expectation.

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a way that each entered into and completed the spiritual experience of the other. Here are the first few verses from Psalm 89:

2 *I will sing of Your mercies, O Lord, forever;  
I will proclaim Your truth<sup>30</sup> with my mouth to all generations.*

3 *For You have said: Mercy will be built forever;  
Your truth will be established in the heavens.*

That is, *in the heavens*, and not in the depths of Hades.

5 *I will establish your seed forever,  
and build up your throne to all generations.*

Here the words *seed* and *throne* are prophecies of Christ, and the New Testament contains many references to «seeds» that are relevant to this prophecy (cf. Rom 4:18, 9:29; Heb 11:18).

Is God absent or present? Is He near at hand, or remote and withdrawn? It's a matter of how you look at it. When the soul looks at reality solely through its pain and suffering, it does not see things clearly, and thus it thinks that Christ and His voluntary

30. Whereas the Septuagint here uses the word «truth», the Hebrew is more accurately translated as «faithfulness» in the sense of «trustworthiness» and «dependability» (in fulfilling promises and obligations). This is the key word and central concept of Psalm 89, and as such is repeated eight times, with an additional two occurrences in adjective form. The Hebrew text consequently confirms and deepens the connection made by the elder between the spiritual dilemma put forward in Psalm 88, and its solution as described in Psalm 89, where God's «faithfulness» is proclaimed and celebrated in the face of present disasters and sufferings.

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sufferings are something abstract, distant, and without real meaning. But when the soul alters its perspective, its inner sense and experience of things will begin to change, and so too the way it confronts and responds to its own sufferings, and then it will see that Christ is very close indeed. When we enter into the place of hope and trust, we see that God is near, and acknowledge Him as our Lord.

*6 The heavens shall declare Your wonders, O Lord;  
and Your truth in the assembly of the saints.*

*7 For who in the heavens shall be compared to the Lord?  
And who shall be likened to the Lord among the sons of God?*

Will the psalmist remain at the final verse of Psalm 88, or will he proceed to make his own the initial verses of Psalm 89? Will he, in other words, accept growth, change and consequently redemption? As we have seen, redemption follows upon the experience and acceptance of death. The moment we accept death, true life can begin. Only by means of death can one «trample down death», and so attain to resurrection. Thus, depending on how the psalmist confronts the problem of suffering, God will be either his savior or his executioner. Again, the secret to his freedom does not lie in the rejection of his sufferings, but in his joyful acceptance of them. He will be truly free only when he lets go of wanting to be free from his sufferings, for all freedom and all life depend on our being in the right relation to God. When he accepts his death; when he allows himself to hear the sound of his footsteps descending into the grave, he will find that death no longer has a hold on him, for now he is with God. The darkness will vanish and he will see only light.



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The deeper meaning of Psalm 88 concerns the nature of the soul's suffering in its struggles with God. Through such suffering, God is seeking for the soul like a hunter, lost as it is in the depths of some dark ocean or in the bewildering labyrinth of life. The psalm also reveals that, by struggling to find the right relation to suffering, to our own death, we shall simultaneously find God, and not simply find Him, but acquire and indeed conquer Him completely. What will be the end result? Will God be the *Lord of my salvation*, or my darkness and death?

At this point, I would like to comment on yet another important feature of this psalm. Nowhere does the psalmist see any trace of freedom, health, or salvation. He expects nothing from God – yet he continually speaks to Him. In the very hour that he is lost; when he is *free among the dead*, he addresses himself to God. In the midst of all his troubles, he continues to stand before God and speak to Him. And despite the nature of his complaint, he is never completely crushed, never completely broken (cf. 2 Cor 4:8), since he continues to cry out to God, down to the very moment when his voice fails him, when his eyes lose their sight, when the desired vision of God seems to be escaping him forever. To the very end, communication with God remains unbroken. Though he has no hope and sees not even the faintest glimmer of the kingdom of heaven, God remains everything for him, and so he continually turns and returns to Him: «Either you save me for Your glory, so that You may be glorified, or I shall be lost, and You along with me». He suffers, but he sees his suffering as something that is directly related to God. «Christ suffers for You, His Father; and I suffer for You too». The life and death of the psalmist are bound up with the life and death of God: «I live for You, for Your glory; but if I die, Your memory shall be removed from the earth».

The psalmist is incapable of seeing himself in isolation from the

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glory of God, because his whole life and existence have meaning only in so far as they are related to God. But he must make the difficult decision to sacrifice himself voluntarily to God. If he accepts to become an instrument of God's will, he will emerge triumphant; but otherwise he will fail. His suffering is beyond his control, it was not something that he willed for himself, but all things begin and end with God, and nothing takes place apart from the divine will, and so he must see himself as an instrument wielded by God. As we've said, in accepting or rejecting my suffering, I am accepting or rejecting God Himself.

In the beginning, the psalmist is self-involved with his suffering. Yet that same suffering leads him to God. Initially, God and I are separate, in such a way that my self, my narrow self-concern, leaves no room for God. If «I» exist, God cannot exist, for there cannot be two Gods, and so it is either God or the self. When someone sees only his own suffering, God cannot answer him, for it is precisely the mistaken, negative attitude toward suffering that constitutes the separation between him and God. But if «I» cease to exist, if my relation to my suffering changes, then I can be united to God. This union depends on the denial of my self, so that God can come into my life.

A psalm such as this, which is so rich with spiritual meaning, requires *understanding*, that is, discernment, which is a gift from God. No amount of human effort, no amount of psychological analysis, no sociological model or philosophical theory, will enable us to understand its deeper meaning. But if God sees my desire for *understanding*, then He will grant me this gift.

We have considered this psalm as if it were the expression of the «psalmist», but it is in fact the story of every soul. The tragedy of the psalmist, his dilemma, is something that we all confront. This

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is why every soul that lives within the Church is required to read (or hear) this psalm every morning, and not simply to read it or hear it, but to experience it just as the psalmist did.

From a human point of view, this experience should also enable us to sympathize with others who are in pain, to make their suffering our own, to throw in our lot with the sick, the suffering, the poor, and those who have fallen into sin. This is a good response to the psalm: to make the pain of others our own and to pray for them, especially if they themselves do not pray, or if for some reason they refuse to pray. But all of this is an act of charity, which the Church encourages but also looks beyond. The suffering of the other constitutes the pain of my own soul, not because I wish or choose to share in someone else's sufferings, but because in a very real way it is my pain, and my suffering. It all depends on whether or not I see the other as some isolated individual, with no real connection to myself, with no way of bridging the distance between us, or if I see his pain as my own. It depends, in other words, on whether or not I understand that both of us are members of the body of the Church, for *when one member suffers, all the members suffer* (1 Cor 12:26). To no longer live exclusively for myself, but for God, also means that I now live with and for my neighbor, *loving him as myself* (Mt 22:39).

It follows, then, that the cries of the Psalter are both the cries of the soul and the cries of the Church, just like in the Song of Songs.<sup>31</sup> The soul and the Church are always the Bride of Christ,

31. See Origen, *On the Song of Songs* 1.1: «The 'Song of Songs' is a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God. And deeply indeed did she love Him, whether we take her as the soul made in His image, or as the Church» (ACW 26:21).

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and they can never be separated. In the same way that the whole Christ and the whole Church are present in each particle of the Eucharistic bread, so too is the whole Church present in every single soul, the whole body present in each member, without any being separated from the Church, for to be separated from it means to cease living.

For me to really feel and understand the words of this psalm; for me to pray in the morning, as I should, when the «Six Psalms» are being read in the darkness of the church, before the sun has risen, I must have experienced the mystery of the Church. It is the suffering Church that expects the liberation of its children from corruption, and as such it is a body that suffers together with Christ (cf. Rom 8:17; Col 1:24). It is the Church that cries out, for she feels her nakedness, her exile from paradise, and her cry is a prayer for redemption. The words of this psalm will become my own when I cease being an isolated individual, when, that is, I become a member of Christ's body, when I come to experience my identity with Him.

When I become conscious of the fact that I am a member of the body of Christ, then I begin my journey on the road to perfection. But to get to this point, there is much that I have to suffer, much that I have to do. In order for me to experience my ecclesial hypostasis,<sup>32</sup> to grow in likeness to God – so that I can pray the words of this psalm in their deeper spiritual meaning – I must make my soul run to God, so that I might reach Him, and so that He, running toward me, might embrace me.

I must learn to accept suffering with joy, to find joy within my suffering, to realize that even in my moments of glory, I am

32. That is, the true identity of the person as discovered and experienced in the Church, see *The Way of the Spirit*, 141-142, 214.

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nothing but *dust and ashes* (Gen 18:27); a *pelican in the wilderness* (Ps 102:6), lost in a desert land, seeking shelter in a landscape of ruins. I must realize my sinfulness, my nakedness, my alienation from God; I must realize that I am *like a sparrow alone on a housetop* (Ps 102:7), not because I have some psychological problem, but because I have been separated from God. I need to experience both my exile and my union with God. I need to experience my inner darkness in order to know that God is my life and my light, that He is my salvation. I need to realize that I am in hell, in prison, in solitary confinement, alone on an island dying of leprosy, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, in order to enter into the mystery of true community, both in this life and in the one to come. My soul must cry out, just as the souls of all the saints have cried out, and then my soul will be saved, suffering together with Christ. Only then will my suffering be a *completion of what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ* (cf. Col 1:24). If I exert myself, and commit myself to the struggles of the spiritual life, then I shall have the right to ask for the *understanding* of the Spirit. Either way, I'm going to suffer. But it's up to me to decide whether I'm going to be a wounded deer panting for water and never finding any (cf. Ps 42:1; Pr 7:22), or a «lamb» sacrificed «together with Christ», and «calling out to Him».<sup>33</sup>

In this cry, this calling out, there exists the hope that I will hear the sound of His footsteps, and that these will overtake my own and lead me to salvation. But even before I cry out, God will answer me and say: *I am here* (Is 58:9).

33. The words in quotation marks are from the dismissal hymn for a female martyr.



## Psalm 81 (LXX 80)

For the end: concerning the winepresses, for Asaph.

- 2 *Rejoice in God our Helper,  
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.*
- 3 *Take up a psalm, and sound the drum,  
and the sweetly sounding lyre with the harp;*
- 4 *Sound the trumpet at the new moon,  
in the notable day of our feast,*
- 5 *Because it is an ordinance for Israel  
and a judgment of the God of Jacob.*
- 6 *He ordained it for a testimony in Joseph,  
when he went out from the land of Egypt,  
and heard a tongue which he did not know.*
- 7 *He removed his back from burdens;  
his hands had slaved at the basket.*
- 8 *You called upon Me in affliction, and I delivered You;  
I heard you in the secret place of the tempest,  
I tested you at the water of contention.* selah
- 9 *Hear, O My people, and I will speak to you,  
O Israel, and I will testify to you; if you hear Me,*
- 10 *There shall be in you no new god,  
nor shall you worship an alien god.*
- 11 *For I am the Lord your God  
Who led you out of the land of Egypt.  
Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it.*
- 12 *But My people did not hear My voice,  
and Israel paid no heed to Me.*

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- 13 *And I let them go according to the ways of their hearts;  
they shall walk in their own ways.*
- 14 *If My people had heard Me,  
if Israel had walked in My ways,*
- 15 *Quickly I would have humbled their enemies,  
and upon their oppressors would I have laid My hand.*
- 16 *The enemies of the Lord have lied to Him,  
but the time [of their doom] shall be everlasting.*
- 17 *And He fed them with the fat of the wheat,  
and with honey out of the rock He satisfied them.*

\*

\*   \*

The title of Psalm 81 tells us that it belongs to Asaph, who was foremost among the musicians that King David appointed to *thank and praise the Lord, the God of Israel* (cf. 1 Chr 16:7; 2 Chr 5:12).<sup>1</sup>

The title itself begins with the words «for the end», which figured in the title of the previous psalm that we considered (Psalm 88). As we noted then, this is a phrase that is usually associated with the most important psalms, which as a rule were performed by the lead musicians. Needless to say, there is more at issue here than the degree of musical difficulty or the complexities of perfor-

1. Abrupt changes of persons and speakers, along with strong, dramatic imagery—all of which are present in this psalm—are characteristic of the poetical style of Asaph. Note that the title does not contain the word «psalm», which appears in the titles of the neighboring Psalms 79, 80, 82, and 83, probably in consideration of the special character of Psalm 81, which is primarily spoken by God.



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mance. The psalms «for the end» are important primarily because of their content, for they speak of God's future manifestation on earth, either in expectation of His advent in the flesh or His Second Coming. In these psalms we can therefore expect to encounter God, for what they describe is a theophany, the self-revelation of God in the midst of the liturgical assembly.

The next phrase, «concerning the winepresses», likewise carries multiple meanings, although generally speaking it should be taken as explaining what comes before it. It seems likely that Psalm 81 was a vintner song for the annual gathering of the grapes. It may have also been associated with the Feast of the Tabernacles. This feast was celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the liturgical year, which fell during the fall, when the ancient Israelites harvested the grapes and offered the first fruits to God (Lev 23:39-43).

Looking beyond the historical context, the «end» is a reference to a future event or condition, in the sense of something brought to perfection, and thus we can see the «winepresses» as a reference to the many churches of Christ. Like «winepresses» (λῆνοι), these churches have appeared in place of the «wine vats» (προλήνια) established by God in Israel: *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill... he hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded only wild grapes* (Is 5:2).<sup>2</sup> Thus the plural

2. Compare the *Commentary on Isaiah* 5.142, attributed to St. Basil of Caesarea: «The *wine vat* is the synagogue, but the *winepress* is the Church, for the one is a preparation for the other, and so the *wine vat* symbolizes the preparation of the law, a preparatory exercise for piety» (PG 30:349BC); St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm* 81: «Under the old law, there was the *wine vat*, that is, the place of sacrifice in the Temple, but after the calling of the gentiles there are now many *winepresses*, by which I mean the churches

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«winepresses» refers to the many local churches, but above all to Christ, Who is Himself the *wine that gladdens the heart of man* (Ps 104:15).

2 *Rejoice in God our Helper,  
shout for joy to the God of Jacob*

The first words we hear are those of the psalmist. His voice is filled with energy; he is carried away by enthusiasm. *Rejoice in God our Helper*, he declares. The occasion of his joyful shouting is not a particular deed or activity of God. The psalmist is not speaking about «God Who *helped* us», or about «God Who *will* help us», and not even about «God Who *helps* us», but of «God Who *is* our Helper». The immediate cause for joy is not anything that God has done or will do, but rather God Himself: it is God Who is the exclusive cause of the congregation's rejoicing.

*Rejoice*, the psalmist tells them. «Rejoicing» is an expression of elation, exultation, enthusiasm; it is a festival of the spirit, a delight that belongs to the *inner man* (cf. Eph 3:16), but which is nonetheless manifested in one's face, in one's eyes, and in the movements of one's hands and body.

The only one in whom we can truly rejoice is God, and so the

of God, where those ripe in faith offer up their fruits» (PG 27:80D); Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 81*: «When you hear *winepresses* you should think of nothing else but the Church, in which we all are gathered together and offer our fruits to God, producing a heady mixture unto the glory and delight of God» (PG 23:972B). St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.5, associates the winepress with Christ «the true vine» (Jn 15:5), who will demand back from us «the nourishing moisture» that He has given us in «the cluster of grapes of our works» (trans. R. Heine, 137).

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psalmist looks only to Him. Addressing himself to the assembly of the faithful, to the people who have gathered in the Tent of Witness, he calls upon them to *rejoice in God our Helper*. God truly stands by us, for a «helper» is someone who is always near me, ever by my side, ready to support me. God is our «helper» because He is with us continuously.

In his ecstasy, the psalmist cannot help but cry out: *shout for joy to the God of Jacob*. He states precisely who this God is: He is our God, the God of Jacob, the God Who stands over and against all other gods.<sup>3</sup> «To this one and only God, *shout for joy*; express all the more fervently the joyful beating of your heart. Clap your hands; open your mouth and sing His praises. Let all your movements, all that you have within you, *shout for joy* on account of God. Let the entire assembly leap with boundless joy». With this verse, we see the deeper meaning of the worship of ancient Israel, which is a shout of joy in response to the presence of the one, true God.

3 *Take up a psalm, and sound the drum,  
and the sweetly sounding lyre with the harp*

*Take up a psalm*. Standing and facing the assembly, the psalmist turns to the Levites and says: «*Take up a psalm* and sing it». These words probably reflect the occasion of the psalm's initial performance, when the psalmist first offered it to the singers and musicians, so that the assembly might sing its responses and of-

3. The title «God of Jacob» appears frequently in sayings about the Biblical patriarchs (Ex 3:6, 15-16; 4:5); in the promise of the pilgrimage of the nations (Is 2:3; Mic 4:2); in the ancient royal prayer in Psalm 20:2, and then in the Asaph (75:10; 76:7) and Korah psalms (46:8, 12; 84:9), a distribution which suggests a source in the traditions of the Northern Kingdom.

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fer prayer and praise to God. «You too», he adds, «who keep and care for the sacred instruments, go and *sound the drum*, and the stringed instruments, the lyre and the harp».

The atmosphere created by the psalmist –by his words, tone, and degree of excitement– is unique. He moves the faithful congregation, the people of God, the people of Israel, and exhorts them with his entire being –soul, body, and speech– to shout forth unreservedly to God. At the same time, he directs the Levites to take up with enthusiasm their instruments, the drum, harp, and the lyre, so that everyone and everything might praise and bear witness to the presence of God.

4 *Sound the trumpet at the new moon,  
in the notable day of our feast*

After this, the psalmist turns to the trumpeters, who, like the Levites, were no ordinary musicians, for we know that they too were priests. The psalmist's gaze embraces all, so that no one remains outside the sacred song. «You too», he says to them, «take up the spiraled ram's horn, and blast forth tidings *at the new moon, in the notable day of our feast*, for today is the day of a great celebration, a *notable* festival». The seventh month was the month of the three great feasts, namely: the ritual celebration of the new moon, which marked the celebration of the New Year, also known as the festival of trumpets (Lev 23:23-35); the Day of Atonement, on the tenth day of the month (Lev 23:26-32); and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles, on the fifteenth, the *notable* day marked by the Old Testament (Lev 23:33-36, 39-43). Perhaps the verse has both feasts in view, that is, the feast of the *new moon* and the *notable day* of the Tabernacles.

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Consequently it seems that this psalm was used during the twenty-day period from the first of the month through the week-long celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 16:13-15), and of course on the fifteenth, which was the *day called holy*, for it was the day of the *holy convocation* (Lev 23:35), for a «feast day» was a gathering of the people, a convocation. «*Sound the trumpet*, then, and so herald this auspicious event».<sup>4</sup>

*Sound the trumpet at the new moon, in the notable day of our feast.* «Let all the people shout with joy to the God of Jacob. And you, Levites, *bring the drum, the lyre, and the harp*. And you, priests, *sound the trumpets*, so that all together we might strike a fitting tone for the presence of God». Already in the wilderness, God had commanded Moses to *make two silver trumpets, for summoning the congregation*. These were no ordinary instruments, for God ordered that their use be *a perpetual statute in all generations* (Num 10:8). The sound of the trumpet was thus employed to heighten awareness of God's presence, especially at critical times

4. Such an interpretation is only possible on the basis of the Septuagint translation, since the Hebrew says «blow the horn at the new moon, at the full moon, for the day of our feast», which limits this psalm's use to these two moon festivals. But this too is problematic since these two festivals are not found together anywhere else in the Old Testament. They do not correspond to the familiar pair of «new moon» and «full-moon Sabbath», since verse 4 exhibits no influence of the weekly Sabbath that became standard after the exile (cf. Ezek 46; Lev 23; Num 28-29). Thus the two festival dates correspond to two separate moon feasts and not to any two-week festival, since the older new-moon festival, attested in 1 Samuel 20:34, lasted at most two to three days. Confronted with these difficulties, the Septuagint translators may have chosen to suppress the full-moon festival by rendering it as «the notable day of our feast», thereby making the psalm available for use in other liturgical contexts.

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in the life of the community (Num 10:1-10). It is no coincidence that we hear the sound of *trumpets of rams' horns* moments before the walls of Jericho come crashing down (Josh 6:4-20).

The blast of the trumpet was the sign that God Himself was with the people, for it was He who threw down those walls. But more generally the sound of the trumpet served to gather the people together, and this is why it is closely identified with the assembly, the *holy day of convocation* (Lev 23:35), when the community of the faithful stood together before God. No ordinary musical sound, the voice of the trumpet was an indication of God's presence.<sup>5</sup>

*5 Because it is an ordinance for Israel  
and a judgment of the God of Jacob.*

*6 He ordained it for a testimony in Joseph,  
when he went out from the land of Egypt;  
and heard a tongue which he did not know*

5. The Old Testament «trumpet» became an important Christian symbol despite the fact that traditional Christian worship proscribes the use of musical instruments. In the homilies of St. Hesychios of Jerusalem, for example, the trumpet designates the Gospels (PG 55:729), or the Gospel's «clarion call» contrasted with the «lyre» of the Old Testament (PG 55:779; cf. PG 93:1268). It can also signify the preaching of the apostles, or Peter (the «trumpet of the mystery», i.e., Mt 16:16). In Hesychios' sermon on the Resurrection, the trumpet symbolizes Christ («forged by the hammer and anvil of the cross»), Who calls the faithful to the feast. See also, Romanos, *On the Fifth Week of the Fast*: «Come and behold Him Whose sound has shaken the whole world, like a trumpet hanging from the wood of the cross» (SC 128:259), which is likely a reference to the *semantron*, i.e., a piece of metal suspended from a length of wood, often compared to the cross, cf. Theodore Studites (PG 99:1745).

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In these verses, the words *ordinance*, *judgment*, and *testimony* mean one and the same thing, namely, what God has commanded. And yet the psalmist does not use these words by chance: each one has been carefully chosen. There were many other words he could have used, such as «law», «decree», «commandment», or «statute», along with all the other cognates familiar to us from Psalm 119—that great meditation on the law of God—and from other psalms as well.<sup>6</sup> Here, the word *ordinance* denotes both the result of the legislative act and the person of the legislator; both the unimpeachable force of the law and its divine source, the *Mighty One*, *the Ruler*, *the Prince of Peace* (Is 9:6). The word *judgment* means essentially the same thing, although with emphasis on God's justice. The God presented to us by the psalmist demands justice, of which he himself has been a beneficiary.

*He ordained it for a testimony in Joseph, when he went out from the land of Egypt.* Here he speaks of the descendants of Joseph, by which he means the Israelites in general. The law, the commandments, and the ordinances established by God are *testimonies*. The word *testimony* likewise invokes the presence of the lawgiver, and thus is more commonly translated as *witness*, which is someone or something that points to someone or something else. But it also has the sense of that which is just, fair, and balanced, along with

6. With 176 verses, Psalm 119 is the longest in the Psalter. Divided into 22 sections composed of 8 verses, the psalm follows the sequence of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, so that the first 8 verses begin with the letter *aleph*, the next 8 with *beth*, and so on. The name of the Lord is repeated 22 times, i.e., once in each section, and the psalm as a whole is an extended praise of the law of God (with at least 10 distinct words being used to denote different aspects of the law), along with counsels on how the faithful may be directed to and in that law.

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the idea that the one who has given the commandments requires their fulfillment. God gave the law to the Jews when he brought them out of Egypt (Ex 19-20), and it was then that He instructed them regarding the feasts and the sound of the trumpets, so that they would be mindful of the fact that God is perpetually at their head, going before them (cf. Num 10:9).

*And heard a tongue which he did not know.* Who heard this? The people of Israel, for they heard a tongue, a language, that they had never heard before: the language of God. And when was this? *When Israel went out from the land of Egypt.* The Israelites learned the language of God as they were about to flee from Egypt, and throughout their long flight from that land.<sup>7</sup> How many times did God speak to them from the cloud, and from beyond the clouds, and indeed from heaven itself! (cf. Ex 24:15-18; 34:5). In fear, the people begged Moses and said: *You speak to us, but let not God speak to us, lest we die* (Ex 20:19). And so Moses went up to the mountain, entered into the cloud, and spoke to God *face to face* (Ex 33:11). And Moses understood the words spoken to him by God, and with the help of God the people of Israel learned the language of God.

7. Compare St. John of Karpathos, *To the Monks in India* 67: «We should mention an inward state that shows the degree of dispassion attained by the Joseph hidden within each of us. Our intellect, departing from Egypt, leaves behind it the burden of the passions and the builder's basket of shameful slavery, and it *hears a language that it does not understand* (Ps 81:6). It hears no longer the demons' language, impure and destructive of all true understanding, but the holy language of the light-giving angels, who convert the intellect from the non-spiritual to the spiritual – a language that illumines the soul that hears and accepts it» (*Philokalia* 1:314). A hymn from the feast of the Annunciation similarly states that «the Theotokos *heard a language that she did not understand* (Ps 81:6), for the angel spoke to her the words of the Annunciation» (*aposticha* of Great Vespers).



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*And heard a tongue which he did not know.* This, then, refers to the language of God that was heard in Egypt and again on Mt. Sinai. According to another interpretation, this is a reference to the language of the Egyptians, to whom the Hebrews were enslaved, and from whom God had liberated them. But even this interpretation carries with it the idea of God's active presence.<sup>8</sup>

With the words *rejoice in God our Helper*, we were ushered briskly into the worship of the ancient Israelites. Their worship was most likely undertaken in the morning, as an offering of thanks to God. Present were the Levites, the priests, and the people, and God Himself appears and speaks.<sup>9</sup> While the psalmist is still speaking, the tone and tenor change, and suddenly the voice of God sounds forth, confirming the truth of what the psalmist is saying.

*7 He removed his back from burdens;  
his hands had slaved at the basket.*

Recalling the time when God spoke to the people and the tyranny from which He delivered them, the psalmist now mentions an event from the past: *He removed burdens from his back*. In the

8. Many interpreters contend that the «language» was Egyptian, but others argue that the use of the first person singular for Israel (in the Hebrew text) immediately before its use for God is improbable, and thus it was the language of God that Israel heard. After many years in Egypt, the Jews surely understood the language of their Egyptian taskmasters, but they had not yet heard God's voice.

9. Because of differences in the texts, which will be noted in the following paragraph, God begins to speak in verse 7 of the Hebrew, and in verse 8 of the Greek.

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Hebrew, it is God Himself Who speaks here and says: «I removed the burden from his shoulder». God *removed the burdens from the backs* of the Israelites, who were weighed down by slavery, and by the clay bricks they were forced to carry under the scorching sun of Egypt.<sup>10</sup> There was no greater insult than that their hands, which had been created to serve God, were forced to carry *baskets* filled with clay and straw, in order to build the houses and cities of the Egyptians.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely here, in the midst of these historical recollections, that the psalmist is interrupted by God:

8 *You called upon Me in affliction, and I delivered You;*  
*I heard you in the secret place of the tempest,*  
*I tested you at the water of contention.* selah<sup>12</sup>

In describing what the people of Israel had suffered in Egypt, and how God had delivered them, the psalmist spoke in the historical third person. But God speaks in the second person, addressing Himself directly to the people: *You called upon Me in your affliction, and I delivered You*. It seems likely that when the people, who had been taught to venerate God by lowering themselves to the ground, heard the sound of this voice, they immediately fell to

10. In verse 7, the language of «slavery» is adopted from the Exodus tradition (Ex 1:11; 2:11; 5:4-5; 6:6-7), whereas the image of the «burden on the shoulder» has parallels in Genesis 49:15, and Isaiah 10:27; 14:25.

11. For St. Gregory of Nyssa, the endless production of bricks represents the interminable cycle of desire, ever seeking satisfaction but never attaining it, see his *On the Life of Moses* 2.59 (trans. A Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 67); cf. id., *On the Beatitudes* 4 (ACW 18:117-129).

12. The direction here for a musical interlude seems an appropriate way to prepare the congregation for the following verse, when they will hear the first words of the first and most important of the Ten Commandments.

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their knees. They knew that at the manifestation of God the only appropriate response is humble veneration and the shedding of copious tears.

*You called upon Me in affliction, and I delivered You.* And what an affliction it was! What suffering! *And I delivered you.* «You called upon Me at a time when you were slaves of the Egyptians, trapped in the nightmare of your sins, when you despaired of your lives, *and I delivered you*». The words *I delivered you* denote primarily the deliverer, the agent, the person, and much less the activity of deliverance.

*You called upon Me in affliction, and I delivered You.* The Hebrew text expresses this in another manner: «From the depths of your anguish you cry out», that is, «like someone who has lost his mind, because he is overcome by his suffering, *that is how you cried out to Me*». The meaning here is different, but it comes quite clearly to the same thing, namely, that the people of Israel were not looking at God. Instead they were looking at their afflictions, their sufferings, at the many clay bricks they had to produce every day. They were overcome by the sufferings of the present, and despaired over their prospects for the future. Yet it was in the midst of their indifference to God that God appeared to them.

*I heard you in the secret place of the tempest.* The meaning of this verse hinges on a related passage in Exodus: *The children of Israel groaned because of their labors, and cried out* (Ex 2:23).<sup>13</sup> That they *cried out* signifies the cry of the soul, the cry of pain. And the passage continues and notes that *God heard their groanings... and*

13. The Hebrew says «I answered you from thunder's hiding place», or «from the secret place of thunder», which supports the elder's interpretation of this verse in light of the Exodus narrative, with particular reference to Moses' ascent on Sinai, which is mentioned at the close of the above paragraph.

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*was made known to them* (Ex 2:24-25). What the text means is that «God came to their aid», but it says *He was made known to them* in order to express the deeper meaning of what was happening. God revealed Himself to them; He made himself *known* to them. *God is the Lord and revealed Himself* to them (Ps 118:27). It was as if He said: «In your affliction you grumbled and complained, but *I heard you* and indeed I did so *in the secret place of the tempest*. When you were lost in *the tempest* of slavery and suffering, *I delivered you*. You were without hope, you were *in a secret place*, obscure, of no significance, not even a people, not anything at all, until I discovered you, revealed Myself to you, and called you forth. And when I was hidden behind the thick clouds, when the tempest raged, when jagged bolts of lightning shone their fierce light everywhere, when you were filled with fear and ran to Moses and cried: ‘You go on ahead, we shall stay below,’ you were anxious and afraid, for all you could see was the terrible light and the thick black cloud, but even then *I heard you*. It appeared to you that I was distant, remote, but in fact I was very close though you did not see Me».

*I heard you in the secret place of the tempest*. This is the description of an action that was immediate, that took place without any delay. Israel speaks and God listens. The same holds true for the phrase *I tested you at the water of contention*. «I tested you at the water of Rephidim, when once again you forgot about Me and thought only of your own thirst. Instead of water, I had revealed to you My Own Self» (cf. Ex 17:1-7).<sup>14</sup> *Encamped at Rephidim, the*

14. The Hebrew says «at the waters of Meribah», a reference to Exodus 17:17, where both Massah and Meribah are mentioned explicitly, but only the event at Meribah is described.

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*people of Israel had no water to drink, therefore they found fault with Moses, and said... «Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us with thirst? Is God with us, or is He not?»* (cf. Ex 17:1-2). They believed, of course, that He was not, for around them they saw only the desert, not God. But God was with them, in their very midst. *They put God to the test* (Ex 17:2), asking: Does God exist, or does He not? And when those words were coming out of their mouths, God was right in front of them.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, Moses became increasingly anxious, but at the same time the presence of God became increasingly more apparent. *«You were in affliction and I heard you, I appeared to you; you were lost, hidden, and yet I heard and answered you. You were thirsty in the desert, but it was no desert, because I was there with you»*. And God continues:

*9 Hear, O My people, and I will speak to you,  
O Israel, and I will testify to you; if you hear Me*

«Listen to me, My people». With how much love, with how much tenderness, does God stoop down to us! It's like He's approaching a friend, putting His hand on his shoulder, and saying: «Listen

15. Compare Origen, *Homily on Exodus* 8.4: «O ungrateful people! They who saw the Egyptians destroyed now desire Egypt! They who saw the flesh of the Egyptians given to the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky again seek the flesh of Egypt! They raise, therefore, a murmur against Moses, nay rather against God» (FOTC 71:306). Origen returns to the scene at Rephidim in *ibid.*, 11.1-2, where he considers different «forms of thirst», both physical and spiritual (citing Mt 5:6; Ps 62:2; Am 8:11), and compares the «striking of the rock» (Ex 17:6) as a type of the piercing of Christ's side (cf. 1 Cor 10:3-4), from which came forth blood and water (Jn 19:34) (FOTC 71:355-35).

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to Me, my child, I want to talk to you. Where did you get the idea that I'm not with you? Can't you hear Me? Don't you see My hand? Israel, my child, *listen to Me, and I will speak to you*. I will make My presence palpable to you, by means of this, My appeal to You, and by coming down so close to you. And *if you hear Me*:

10 *There shall be in you no new god,  
nor shall you worship an alien god.*<sup>16</sup>

«If you wish to hear Me, you will not worship another god. But if you forget Me, you will end up worshipping *a new god*, a god lately concocted. But if you *hear Me*, I shall remain your God, *your Helper*». Although this may appear to take the form of a threat, it's actually more of a complaint, as if God were saying: «If only you would listen to Me! You just don't understand Me. If you could hear what I'm saying to you, you wouldn't fashion *new gods* for yourselves».

The *new god* stands in direct opposition to the *God of Jacob*. What is a *new god*? It is whatever the real God is not.<sup>17</sup> The *new gods* are the idols fashioned by man. They are, in fact, projections of man himself, who has put himself in the place of God.<sup>18</sup> Man's

16. This formulation does not follow the First Commandment in the Decalogue, but the equivalent variations in Deuteronomy 32:12 and Psalm 44:2, and especially the older form in Exodus 34:14.

17. This verse figured prominently in the Arian controversy, and occurs frequently in the writings of the orthodox writers of the fourth century. See, for example, St. Gregory of Nyssa, *To Simplicios, On Faith*: «Whatever is 'new' can't be God, just as Scripture says, *there shall be in you no new god*, and so those (i.e., the Arians) who say that 'there was a time when the Son of God did not exist' deny His divinity» (GNO 3/1:61); id., *Against Eunomios* (GNO 1/1:164; 2/2:71).

18. Compare St. Gregory the Theologian, *First Theological Oration* 6: «How,

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gods and idols are his thoughts; his self-will is the god he worships, for he is a slave to his desires. One of the prophets says *they have placed their thoughts in their hearts* (Ezek 14:3), which means that in the place where they should have established God, they set up their vain thoughts. The Hebrew text is even more emphatic, for it says *they have taken their idols into their hearts* (Ezek 14:3).<sup>19</sup> But whether we speak of idols, or thoughts, or passions, it amounts to the same thing: the gods of the heart.<sup>20</sup> «If you had listened to Me, you would not have filled your heart with idols».

*Nor shall you worship an alien god.* «These men have placed their thoughts in their heart: *shall I even answer them?* (Ezek 14:3). How can I possibly respond to them? I cry out to them, but they

I ask you, shall such a discussion (i.e., of the «birth» of the Son from God the Father) be interpreted by the man who subscribes to a creed of adulteries and infanticides, who worships the passions, who is incapable of conceiving anything higher than the body, who fabricated his own gods only the other day, gods distinguished by their utter vileness», and id., *Second Theological Oration* 15: «Men of worse passions even made gods of their emotions, or gave divine honors to anger, murder, lust, and drunkenness, finding here an excuse for their own sins» (trans. L. Wickham & F. Williams, 220; 232-233).

19. The Hebrew word here, *gillulim*, is Ezekiel's characteristic term for idols, and literally means «balls of dung». It occurs 39 times in Ezekiel, compared with 9 times in the rest of the Old Testament.

20. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria: «Even today there exist pagan shrines and idols. One such shrine is desire, and the idol within it is the demon of lust, since the person who is a slave to pleasure has renounced Jesus and worships the idol of Venus that he has set up within himself, that is, the base pleasure of carnal desire. So too the person who is overcome by anger: he has denied Jesus in order to worship Mars, the god of war, and so on through the pantheon of vices. But if you prevail over these passions, and throw down these idols, you will be a true martyr, having made the *good confession in front of many witnesses* (1 Tim 6:12)» (*Gerontikon* A:5).

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do not understand Me; they don't see Me, they don't feel My presence. They have other gods. Perhaps I should remain in My dark cloud, keep silent, for *how shall I even answer them?*»

11 *For I am the Lord your God*

*Who led you out of the land of Egypt.*

*Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it.*

«I am your God, the only God you have, for I am the only God there is. And it was I, and not the idols, *Who led you out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth, and I will fill it.*<sup>21</sup> Open it with the words of prayer; pray to Me and I will answer you. Have you not seen how a newly hatched bird, whose eyes are still closed, opens up its mouth to receive food from its mother? So you too should *open wide your mouth*, even if you can't see Me, and I will fill you. I will give you exactly what you need. Have faith; place your trust in Me. Feel deeply the bond that we share. Give yourself to Me».

But because God sees the future, he continues with His com-

21. See St. Basil of Caesarea, *On Psalm 34*: «*His praise shall always be in my mouth* (Ps 34:2). The prophet seems to promise something impossible. For how can the praise of God always be in the mouth of man? When he engages in the ordinary conversations pertaining to daily life, he does not have the praise of God in his mouth. When he sleeps, he will keep absolute silence. And how will the mouth of one who is eating and drinking produce praise? We answer to this that there is a certain spiritual mouth of the interior man by which he is fed when he partakes of the word of life, which is the *bread that comes down from heaven* (Jn 6:33). Concerning that mouth the prophet also says, *I opened my mouth and drew in the spirit* (Ps 119:131). The Lord even urges us to have it open wide so as to receive plentifully the food of truth. *Open wide your mouth*, He says, *and I will fill it* (Ps 81:11)» (FOTC 46:250).



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plaint: «I am He Who brought you out of Egypt. I am the One Who heard you. I am the One Who helped you. If only you would listen to me! But you don't». And so God, filled with pain, turns to the psalmist, and says:

12 *But My people did not hear My voice,  
and Israel paid no heed to Me.*

He did not say «*the* people did not hear My voice», but «*My* people did not hear My voice». *And Israel paid no heed to Me.* «Israel did not even wish to turn its ear to Me; they paid no attention to my complaint, nor to my law. Had they *listened to My voice*, had they *paid heed to Me*, I would have answered them. But they would not listen. And so now I will do what I have done in the past: I will abandon them».

13 *And I let them go according to the ways of their hearts;  
they shall walk in their own ways.*

It's as if He's telling them: «Leave! Be gone! Go and run after your pleasures, those *thoughts that you placed in your heart*. In the past, you followed your own wishes, your own will; from henceforth go and do likewise». Here we have a prophecy that God revealed to Asaph. «The Israelites will continue on their way, following wherever their idols lead them, while I in pursuit will cry out and shout and promise:

14 *If My people had heard Me,  
if Israel had walked in My ways,*

15 *Quickly I would have humbled their enemies,  
and upon their oppressors would I have laid My hand.*

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«In a single moment, at a time when they would have least expected it, in the blink of any eye, *I would have humbled their enemies*, I would have reduced them to nothing; I would *have laid My hand* on those who now trouble them, and make them vanish from the face of the earth. *I would have laid My hand* on those who now oppress them, and press them into the dust of the ground».

16 *The enemies of the Lord have lied to Him,  
but the time [of their doom] shall be everlasting.*<sup>22</sup>

*The enemies of the Lord* will be defeated and placed under subjection to God, and the time of their subjection will know no end. That *the enemies of the Lord have lied to Him* is already a sign of their defeat, for it is usually the conquered that tell lies, in an attempt to procure more favorable terms for themselves. «*But they did not listen*, and so their enemies have triumphed over them and reduced them to slavery».

*The enemies of the Lord have lied to Him, but the time [of their doom] shall be everlasting.* In this verse, it is not the people who speak, since they have been invited to *rejoice* and *shout for joy*. The psalmist has returned, and it is his voice we now hear. But whereas he began with shouts of joy, he ends on a note that is as bitter as it is true, for it is a story repeated in the life of every soul, and in the history of all peoples and nations, for we all forget that at every moment of our life we are standing in the presence of God.

22. Both the Hebrew and Greek say only «their *time* shall be everlasting», and consequently most interpreters endeavor to round out the verse in various ways consistent with the context; the RSV says «their *fate* will last forever». One attempt at a textual emendation reads «their *terror* will last forever».

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With this bitter conclusion on his lips, the psalmist continues his song and says:

17 *And He fed them with the fat of the wheat,  
and with honey out of the rock He satisfied them.*

A moment ago, God had spoken of all that He did for Israel, and all that He was ready to do. The psalmist, who has not abandoned the object of his joyous praises, speaks again of God and His works.

*And He fed them with the fat of wheat.* Who did? The psalmist doesn't say, but it can only be the One Who had just spoken and Who made His presence known to them. It can only be the One Whom they abandoned, even though he *fed them* with choice wheat. He it was Who *fed them with honey out of the rock* (cf. Deut 32:13), and who continuously worked miracles on their behalf.<sup>23</sup> And yet, they forgot all about Him, even though there was never a time when He was not standing right before their very eyes.

On this note our psalm ends. Nonetheless this is not a psalm of desolation, for we sense that is filled with the presence of God. It teaches us that we encounter God and enter into communion

23. See St. John Chrysostom, *Letter from Exile* 8: «Pleasure in eating is not found in the nature of food, but in the disposition of those who eat it. Thus when the prophet described the miracles that took place in the desert, he said *with honey out of the rock He satisfied them* (Ps 81:11), even though actual honey did not pour forth from the rock. How are we to explain this? In so far as the Jews were exhausted from their wanderings and overcome by thirst, they eagerly consumed the water from the rock, which to them seemed like a comb of flowing honey, not because the nature of the water had been changed into honey, but because their burning thirst made the water seem all the more sweet» (SC 103:100-102).

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with Him when we learn how to see Him and understand His language. Truly has it been said that «man alone is capable of communion with God, for to man alone among all living creatures does God speak».<sup>24</sup>

The psalmist expresses wonderfully the daily struggle of every man and woman. As we have said, this is the story of all of us, regardless of our position in life. It makes no difference whether we have been enslaved by our enemies, are currently enjoying great success, or are being swept along by some misadventure. In reality, beneath the surface of things, our lives are a struggle, exactly like Jacob's struggle with the angel (cf. Gen 32:24-30). We need to recognize that this «angel» is in fact God Himself, and say to Him: *Tell me your name* (Gen 32:29). God of course may choose not to reveal His name to you, but just as He blessed Jacob, He will surely bless you too.

24. *On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life* 159 (*Philokalia* 1:353). This text, once thought to have been written by St. Antony the Great, is most likely a collection of ancient philosophical maxims adapted for Christian use.

6  
Psalm 90 (LXX 89)

A prayer of Moses, the man of God.

- 1 O Lord, *You have been our refuge*  
*in generation and generation.*
- 2 *Before the mountains came to be,*  
*and the earth and the world were formed,*  
*and from everlasting to everlasting You are.*
- 3 *Do not turn man away to humiliation;*  
*You have said, «Return, sons of men».*
- 4 *For a thousand years in Your eyes*  
*are like yesterday gone,*  
*like a watch in the night.*
- 5 *Their years shall be of no account;*  
*in the morning they are like grass that shall pass away.*
- 6 *In the morning it shall bloom and pass away,*  
*in the evening it shall fall and become withered and dry.*
- 7 *For we have fainted away in Your wrath,*  
*and in Your anger we have been troubled.*
- 8 *You have set our iniquities before You,*  
*Our lifespan is in the light of Your face.*
- 9 *For all our days are faded away,*  
*and in Your wrath we have fainted away;*  
*our years have, like a spider,*  
*spun out their tale.*
- 10 *As for the days of our years, they are but seventy years,*  
*and if we have strength, perhaps eighty years,*  
*and what is more than these is toil and travail,*

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*For meekness has come upon us,  
and we shall be chastened.*

- 11 *Who can know the strength of Your wrath?  
And out of fear of You, who can recount Your anger?*
- 12 *So make Your right hand known to me,  
and to them that in their heart are instructed in wisdom.*
- 13 *Come back, O Lord! How long? —  
and have pity on Your servants.*
- 14 *In the morning we were filled with Your mercy, O Lord,  
and we rejoiced and were glad in all our days.*
- 15 *Let us be glad for the days in which You humbled us,  
the years we saw evil.*
- 16 *And look upon Your servants,  
and upon Your works,  
and guide their sons.*
- 17 *And may the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and guide aright the work of our hands,  
and the work of our hands guide aright.*

\*

\*   \*

Many of us have been taught to see the Book of Psalms as an object of historical or theological study, or perhaps as a collection of literary texts. But it's really a book of prayers. Today we shall look at Psalm 90, not so much with an eye on its theological concepts, but with attention to the feelings characteristic of the psalmist during prayer.

*A prayer of Moses, the man of God.*

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The title reveals the identity of the psalmist and tells us something about the psalm's content, which it describes as «a prayer». It is an ancient psalm, perhaps the most ancient.<sup>1</sup>

Why is Moses called here «the man of God»? So that we might be introduced to the spirit of the psalm, and call to mind all that Moses experienced, that is, the great works of God, which he treasured in his heart, reflected on, and wrote down in the form of a psalm. The Old Testament states that Moses was *a man of God* (Dt 33:1; 1 Esdr 5:49). Why? Because whatever he did, he did in accordance with directives he received from God. He was God's obedient servant, and did nothing apart from God's personal instructions. Moses was the man who saw God, who spoke to God, and asked God for whatever he needed. At times he could even be critical of God (cf. Ex 4:10-14): that's how much boldness and familiarity he had with Him. Moses was a man who lived closely with God on a daily basis; whenever he wanted to, he appeared before God in the Tabernacle, and spoke with Him, worshipped and praised Him. He lived with God as a man might live with his

1. This psalm is unique in attributing the text to Moses. Of the eight times that the name of Moses is mentioned in Psalms, seven occur in the fourth book of Psalms, which begins here. St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, sees the five divisions of the Psalter (Psalms 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150) as marking five distinct stages of the spiritual life, each stage revealed in the psalm that opens each of the five books. Thus his commentary on the fourth stage of ascent is an exposition of Psalm 90. Moses was one of St. Gregory's primary models of progress in the spiritual life, on which he would later write a major treatise, *On the Life of Moses*. Some modern commentators have proposed that the five books of the Psalter have been arranged as a sequence interpreting Israel's history by relating each book to a particular epoch in that history, for details, see F.-L. Hossfeld & E. Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Minneapolis, 2005), 424.

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friend. This is the felt experience behind the psalm that Moses wrote or rather by means of which he expressed his feelings.

1 *O Lord, You have been our refuge  
in generation and generation*

The psalm begins very simply, and provides us with a general indication of the major themes that will follow. In what is surely a sign of their close relationship, Moses addresses God in the intimate register of the second person (i.e., «You»), for this is the God he walked with in the desert, visited on the mountain, and with Whom he had countless conversations. «It is to You, my God, to You who are so very much my own, that I now speak».

*You have been our refuge.* Instead of «refuge» (καταφυγή), which emphasizes the act or activity of seeking refuge, the Hebrew text says «dwelling place». The Septuagint translators could have said «place of refuge» (καταφύγιον), for *the* place of refuge is God, to whom Moses turned during all the difficult moments of his life. «There's no need for You to invite me to come to You, O God, for when I need You, and as soon as I need You, You're already present. And so it is to You that I run, for You are my place of refuge, my hope. You are the One Who rescues me from every danger, from every difficulty; before I even realize that I'm in trouble, You've already rescued me».<sup>2</sup>

2. See St. Basil of Caesarea, *On Psalm 46*: «*God is our refuge and strength* (Ps 46:2). To him who is able to say, *I can do all things in Christ, Who strengthens me* (Phil 4:13), God is "strength". Now, it is the privilege of many to say *God is our refuge, and O Lord you have been our refuge* (Ps 90:1). But to say it with the same feelings as the prophet is the privilege of few. For there are only a few who do not depend on human things but depend wholly upon God and breathe Him and have all hope and trust in Him. And our actions convict



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But the passage would be still more powerful if it said «dwelling place» (or «abode»). «I do not turn to You, my God, only when I'm in trouble, or worried about something, or when I'm suffering. I am always with You, dwelling within You. You are my true home, not merely a temporary "place of refuge." And so I am always so close to You, so very much Your own; I am so closely connected to You, that I have the feeling that, when I'm with You, I'm home. And just as a man lives so comfortably in his own home, so peacefully, having everything he needs, so too do I dwell in You».

Moses has the feeling of nearness to God, of proximity to God, not only in times of trouble but in times of joy. «You», he says to God, «are my hope and my joy. You are the cause and the foundation of my hope, the ground of my every experience, and my experience of You is not something that simply comes from You, as if from a source, but it is You Yourself, my King and my God».

Nonetheless the Greek translators did not use the beautiful image of the «abode», but chose instead the word «refuge», which as we said a moment ago stresses the element of activity. From this point of view, the word is used as a kind of *synecdoche*, that is, as a part that designates the whole. In this regard we think of Christ's dialogue with Martha in the Gospel according to John. Christ asked her: «*Do you believe that your brother shall rise from the dead?*» «Of course I believe it», she said, «*he will rise on the last day*» (Jn 11:24). The Lord however was not satisfied with her

us whenever in afflictions we run to everything else rather than to God. Is a child sick? You look around for an enchanter, or go to the doctor seeking medicines, having neglected God. If a dream troubles you, you run to the interpreters of dreams. And if you're afraid of some enemy, you cunningly secure the help of a powerful patron. In short, in every need you contradict yourself, for naming God as your "refuge" you in fact seek help from vain and useless things» (FOTC 46:299)

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answer; not that what she said was incorrect, but because she had failed to understand the question. So Christ says to her: «*I am the resurrection and the life* (Jn 11:25). I am the source and cause of resurrection, or rather I am myself the resurrection of your brother. There's no need to wait until the "last day" for your brother to rise. Your brother is already risen, for I am the resurrection; Your brother lives, for I am the life of the world» (Jn 11:25; 14:6). It is one thing to say that «Lazarus will be resurrected» and another thing entirely to confess that the resurrection is Christ is Himself.

Something similar is happening here. The Lord does not simply provide me with refuge, but He Himself *is* my refuge (cf. Pss 18:2; 31:1-4). And because Moses has taken refuge in Him, he sees God wherever he looks. We have already seen how Moses' closeness, his intimacy with God, was expressed through his use of the informal second person. Yet Moses does not simply «speak» to God, he experiences God, his relationship with God is a living experience, and not merely an exchange of words and ideas.

Moses expresses what he feels, what he senses, what he sees, and not what he imagines or thinks. «You *are* my refuge; You are *our* refuge. Yet I do not run to You for refuge, for that is something that I have already done. Indeed it is You who run toward me». It's as if I'd written a letter containing a request, and I gave it to a particular person who will convey it to the recipient. One could say that my letter is being carried or delivered by this person. But it could also be said that this person is himself my letter, that he himself embodies the content of my message. The Apostle Paul says something like this when writing to the Corinthians: *Do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are*

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*a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts* (2 Cor 3:1-3). That which appears to be merely the means or the mode of expression is in fact so closely connected with its source as to be virtually identical with it. «It is not I who flee to You for refuge, but rather You Who move toward me, while at the same time drawing all toward the Father, for You are the sole mediator between Him and His creation (cf. 1 Tim 2:5; Jn 4:6). You are forever moving toward me, running to me, and forever arriving, even before I know it». And so Moses is the *man of God*, who turns and looks to God, while God, from all eternity, has been turning and looking at Moses.

The words *O Lord, You have been our refuge in generation and generation* are powerful. «O Lord», Moses is saying, «I do not speak solely on the basis of my own experience, but based on the experience of all peoples of all generations». And this is no small matter since experience confirms the truth of a thing long before we stop to reflect on it. That God is our refuge is something we have lived. And it is something that all future generations will live, and each one will bring its own experience to the following phrase:

*2 Before the mountains came to be,  
and the earth and the world were formed,  
and from everlasting to everlasting You are.*

«You exist, O God, before the mountains were formed, before the earth was fashioned, before the universe was born, for You exist *from everlasting to everlasting*». What does the psalmist want to say here? Is he trying to affirm the objective existence of God? Is he trying to put forward an ontological argument for the existence of God? Absolutely not. Such things do not interest him. He is not

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an apologist for his faith. Instead, he expresses his personal relationship with God. This does not mean, however, that he sees the existence of God simply from his own individual perspective. On the contrary, he looks at himself and at all things from a vantage point outside of himself, beyond himself, indeed from beyond the world, for he sees things from the point of view of God. This is clear from the order of the words: *Before the mountains came to be and the earth and the world were formed*. In this way he is showing us how God, *from everlasting to everlasting*, comes from beyond time into history and enters the life of man.

Does humanity disappear in this framework? Not at all. The existence of God is directly related to and concerned with human beings.<sup>3</sup> God's love for mankind did not begin at some point after the formation of the earth and the rise of civilization. As we shall see, Moses is not talking about space or time in the abstract, but about real history.

*Before the mountains came to be*. There was a time when the earth was covered with water, *before the dry land appeared* (Gen 1:9), when *the dry land was hidden from sight* (cf. Gen 1:2). *But then the water was collected into its place and the dry land appeared* (Gen 1:9). First the summits of the mountains appeared. Then, when the waters had receded still further, the rest of the dry land appeared, the surface of the earth as we now see it. Finally what Moses calls «the world» appeared, by which he means the «inhabited world», and so he is speaking of the time when the valleys and plains were settled and populated.

3. Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10.4: «They say that God and man are paradigms of each other, and the degree to which out of love God became man, so too is man able through love to become like God» (PG 91:1113).

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It's as if Moses were saying: «You, O God, have been related to me, not simply from the beginning of human history, but long before the peaks of the mountains rose from the depths of the sea, when the whole earth was still covered with water. I did not exist then. But in Your divine plan, in Your vision of the universe, You had already committed Yourself to me; You had already begun to write my history, to draw near to me in Your mind, in Your divine energy, in Your pre-eternal plan, which from all time has intended that this is how things should be. And so our relationship – which is Your existence to and for me – is something that began long before I was born, long before *the earth was formed*. From *forever to forever*, from age to age, and *to the end of the ages* (cf. Mt 28:20), our relationship will exist. Thus from the moment I took shape in Your mind, in Your love, You *became my refuge* and I became inseparably united to You».

He continues, in the next beautiful verse, and says:

3 *Do not turn man away to humiliation;  
You have said, «Return, sons of men».*

This verse can be interpreted in many ways, but the basic meaning is clear. Let's look at it from the experience of all those «generations» that the prophet is talking about. «All creation, all time, and all history prove that You, O God, have created us for Yourself». That much is certain. Now, however, there is a question: «*Will You turn man away to humiliation?* Has everything now changed? Have You decided to destroy human life, to destroy those whom You created to be with You always? Can it be that You have now condemned us to return to nothingness, to the absolute *humiliation* of non-existence? *Do not turn man away to humiliation*».

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Moses is now at the most critical juncture in his life. He is standing outside the Promised Land (cf. Dt 34:1-4). He sees from afar the place that God had promised to the Jews, a band of escaped Egyptian slaves, most of whom had already died, for many years had passed since they came out of Egypt. All those who at that time were over the age of twenty were now dead, and this was no accident, since it came about in accordance with the just judgment of God. They had sinned and they had to die. Forty years of struggle were required before a mere remnant of the people could enter the land of Canaan (cf. Num 14:26-35; 32:10-14). In view of this tragic situation, Moses' distressing cry is perfectly natural: «Have You decided to wipe out all those who believed in You, whom You created for Yourself? It cannot be possible. Did you say "*Return, sons of men*"? To where? To what? Shall we return to the nothingness, to the dust and earth from which we were taken?» (Gen 3:19).<sup>4</sup>

In this verse, the prophet's anguish is clear. All generations speak of man's immortality, which is nothing other than his eternal bond with God. «Is it possible that we have now reached the moment when this bond shall be broken? Are we now to part from each other forever? Shall we now cease to live, cease to exist? Can it be that You, Who have been with us *from before the ages*, will not be with us *to the end of the ages*?» (cf. Mt 28:20).

«My God, can it be that those who have survived are likewise condemned to die? So many have already died; we are but a small

4. The word «humiliation» translates the Septuagint Greek *ταπείνωσις*, but translations based on the Hebrew say «dust», making this an allusion to Gen 3:19. However, the Hebrew word for «dust» (*afar*) is not used here, but rather the word *daka*, which indicates «lowness», or «crushing down», and thus a substitute for «dust» only by poetic extension.

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remnant. We came forth from Egypt, we suffered terribly at the hands of foreigners in the wilderness (cf. Ex 17:8-13; Num 20:14-21, 21:1-3) – we endured forty years of wandering! – and not even one of us will be left? I don't mind if I die, but shall all the others be lost as well? Will we all breathe our last here in this desert? Is it true that *You said*, “*Return, sons of men*”? And having said this, do You mean to carry it out? Is this Your last word, that we shall all return to the dust from which we were taken? Is this decision final? Is there no hope that we shall once again feel that You are our refuge, our shelter, our home?»

This is one way to interpret the text, which I think is very forceful but also very beautiful, since it expresses the prophet's personal experience based on his relationship with God. He sees into the depths of things; his vision is not limited to the dead bodies lying about in the desert. He penetrates to the reasons, to the causes of what he sees, and realizes that behind it all is the infidelity of the human heart. He understands that sin is separation from God. It is sin that renders God «non-existent», no longer alive for us, completely dead to me. The existence of God, as we said, is related to the existence of man. In the same way, the absence of God, the death of God, is also related to man, for the «death of God» is my separation from Him.

There is of course another way in which this verse has been understood, which hinges on whether or not it ends with a question mark. If it does, then it can be taken to mean: *Do not turn man away to humiliation* – do not leave us perpetually lost in sin, which has brought us so low, *for have You not said* – taking the imperative as a question – «*Return, sons of men*»? Taken this way, it's as if God is saying: «Stop moving away from Me, for the distance between us is sin itself». *Return*, come back to me. From the beginning you were united to Me, and so now I'm calling you to

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come back». <sup>5</sup> This is a completely different reading, and stands or falls on the presence or absence of a question mark. <sup>6</sup>

4 *For a thousand years in Your eyes  
are like yesterday gone,  
like a watch in the night.*

«That which we ask of You, O Lord, is that our years be bound up together with You, that we live for You. Our days pass. We see that all fall down and die. We ask nothing more than to reach the land that spreads out before us. There it is, off in the distance, the Land of Canaan, which during the time of our captivity You promised to give us (cf. Ex 3:8, 17; 6:4). It seems within reach. With one small step we could be inside. Won't you then give us a little more time, just enough so that we might enter? Give us a

5. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.7: «Turn back, repent, be converted, *sons of men* (Ps 90:3). An utterance such as this is a precept, for the command takes our nature into account and proposes the cure for our evils. For, he says, since you fell away from the good because you are subject to change, submit yourselves to the good again by means of change. Return again to the same thing from which you have fallen away, since the power of freely allotting to themselves whatever they wish lies in the power of human choice» (trans. R. Heine, 104).

6. This verse has long challenged translators and interpreters. In the Greek translation produced by Aquila, a second-century Jewish scholar, the «You have said» was placed in the future tense: «You will say». However, the sense seems to require the initial negative supplied by the Septuagint and other ancient translators: *Do not turn many away... and [do not] say*, etc., which is supported by the overall context of the Hebrew: *You bring man back to "dust"* (see above, n. 4), *and say*, «Turn back, O sons of men!» making this a petition that the sentence pronounced on Adam and Eve (Gen 3:19) may not be carried out in the case of Israel, i.e., taking «say» as a command («but say now, instead»).



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few more months, even a few hours. For even a thousand of our years – what are they to You? *Like a yesterday gone*, or even better, *like a watch in the night*».

«Who even notices a *watch in the night*? It is but a matter of three or four hours of the night, when everyone is sleeping, and the only one who is awake is the drowsy night watchman. That's what a thousand of our years is like for You: absolutely nothing. And so, if you can give us a thousand years so easily, won't you give us a few more hours, a few more days? Save us from this death that is upon us».

5 *Their years shall be of no account;  
in the morning they are like grass that shall pass away.*

6 *In the morning it shall bloom and pass away,  
in the evening it shall fall and become withered and dry.*

«What is the “Promised Land”? It is the promise of Your love. It is the land in which we will be united to You, where we will be together with You. As for our *years*, they *are of no account*. A thousand of our years are for You like a *watch in the night*. And what for You is but a passing moment, is for us an eternity. Thus *our years are of no account*» – a phrase which could be more literally rendered as *our years are* «vanities», «rejections», and «objects of contempt». Time is something that frightens us, it moves so swiftly, it is more fleeting than a dream. Beneath our troubled existence lurks the empty void of time, which makes all our efforts futile, reducing us to people *of no account*. It may look like we march forward or make progress, but nothing changes. We live, we work, we age, but we die having completed nothing. Our life is tedious, wearisome, fraught with anxiety, like people forever

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waiting for something that never seems to arrive. «But all these things, looked at from Your point of view, through the shining prism of Your eternity, are nothing more than the passage of a few moments *in the morning* that are gone before one has even noticed». <sup>7</sup>

*In the morning it shall bloom and pass away.* Morning passes quickly, like the first growth of green grass in the spring: before you have a chance to look at it, it's withered and gone. It does not last long enough for you to observe its growth and change over time. Instead it's like something that reaches its end immediately; something whose beginning and end are one and the same. Like a flash of lightning, a human life suddenly appears, and no sooner does it light up the sky than it vanishes, devoured by the jaws of eternal darkness. You open your eyes on a new day, and before you've even had a chance to take the measure of it, it's over, and all that's left is the fiery sun melting into the sea, dissolving without a trace behind the horizon. Like grass withered and bent, the exhausted day declines into night. <sup>8</sup>

7. Compare St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, On Prayer 57: «What am I, O uncreated Lord, if not *earth and ashes* (Gen 18:27)? And what is my time if not *a passing shadow* (Ps 144:4), a fleeting dream, before You, O timeless One? *For a thousand years in Your eyes are like yesterday gone, like a watch in the night* (Ps 90:4)» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:348).

8. Compare St. John Chrysostom, Letter to Olympias 7: «The things of this life are temporary, like a river that rushes by. One of the prophets compares it, not even to grass, but to something more feeble and fleeting, saying *all the glory of man is like the flower of grass* (Is 40:6)» (SC 13b:136); and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.7: «Moses again acknowledges the transitory character of our nature in order to entreat God more for mercy. For he relates, by means of a vivid example, why one must consider the *morning* and *evening* of our nature, that is, our youth and old age, to be wretchedness. In the morning it is verdant, blossoms, and passes.

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«Thus what we ask from You, O Lord, is something which for You is very easy, but which for us is insufferable, painful, tragic. We are waiting, Lord; have mercy on us. Look at what our sin, our distance from you, has gotten us: our entire life is like a bit of grass, like a flower, which vanishes from sight no sooner than you stop to enjoy it. Our years wither up, drained and devoid of life».

Instead of *their years shall be of no account*, the Hebrew says «Our years are like a dream».<sup>9</sup> This is likewise a powerful image, since it presents the eternal God suddenly cutting off man's life because of sin.<sup>10</sup> The sense would then be: «Lord since we have been separated from You because of sin, even a thousand of our years is but a dream, false and fleeting, in fact it is nothing at all». And as for something that vanishes so quickly, what sort of existence can it be said to have? It is non-existent, lacking substance. This reveals that sin, which is the cause of suffering and death, is unnatural to human life, just as death itself is (cf. Wis 1:13-14).<sup>11</sup>

Thereafter, when the moisture is spent by reason of age, and the plant has finished blooming, and the natural blossom of youth has vanished, what is left is a drying up and a fading away. This is the nature of man» (trans. R. Heine, 105).

9. English renderings of the Hebrew include: «You sweep men away; they are like a dream», or «You engulf them with sleep», or simply «You flood them away». These, however, are conjectural, since both the verb and the syntax of the Hebrew suggest that the text has been corrupted. Some interpreters have tried to connect the language of «flooding» or «engulfment» with the image of being swept away in a flood of rain, which they associate with the succeeding verse, which mentions God's wrath. By extension, the notion of «sleep» (and dreams) is connected to the sleep of death.

10. Compare Evagrius, *On Psalm 90*: «You will turn man away to humiliation (Ps 90:3) when You abandon him to his sin» (ΒΕΠΙΕΣ 80:185).

11. See St. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Love* 2.93: «Death in the true sense is separation from God, and the *sting of death is sin* (1 Cor 15:56).

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Man was made for life, and there is no life apart from God. Just as flesh cannot exist without blood, just as the soul cannot be separated from the spirit, so too is it impossible to separate man from his true life, that is, from God. If by chance we should see such a thing, it is not natural. «Sin has intruded itself between me and You, O God, between Your people and You, the King of Israel» (1 Sam 8:7; Is 44:6).

Ultimately, Moses describes the causes and conditions of our *lowliness*, our *humiliation* by sin, our tragic fall. We were created for eternal life, yet we wither and die like grass.

*7 For we have fainted away in Your wrath,  
and in Your anger we have been troubled.*

«Why, O Lord, do I say these things to You? Look at it from my point of view. We've been wiped out, obliterated. A few straggling survivors are all that is left. The things we have seen have left us traumatized. We're like a heap of human ruins, pitiful to look at. We are broken, shattered, as if life itself had left us. What could possibly be left for us, O Lord? *We have fainted away*» – «We have been consumed», says the Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> «You have ruined us, O Lord, by your absence; by this final crushing blow. How long will You remain far away from us? How long will You be silent? Stop

Adam, who received the sting, became at the same time an exile from the tree of life, from paradise, and from God (cf. Gen 3); and this was necessarily followed by the body's death. Life, in the true sense, is He who said, *I am the life* (Jn 11:25), and who, having entered death, led back to life him who had died» (*Philokalia* 2:81).

12. Because the words for both «wrath» and «fury» in the Hebrew suggest hotly burning breath, the language here carries forward the image of grass withering and dying.

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this horrible destruction, this terrible punishment. Why are we *fainting away*? Why have we been abandoned? Why are we dying here in this desert?

8 *You have set our iniquities before You,  
Our lifespan is in the light of Your face.*

Once again *iniquity*, the experience of separation, worms its way in between God and man. «You are counting up our iniquities, O Lord, and not just the ones we willed, but our «involuntary sins» as well, according to the Hebrew. «Not a single sin escapes Your notice. Our whole life is like an open book before You, an object illuminated by a powerful light. Rays of light stream forth from Your face, and Your discerning eyes penetrate into the darkness. You observe the heights of heaven, You scrutinize the depths of hell, You see into the innermost recesses of my soul (cf. Ps 139:7-10). Nothing is hidden from You. All things are open to You».

*You have set our iniquities before You.* This is how he expresses his repentance: *For I know my iniquity, and my sin is ever before me* (Ps 51:5). «I know my sin, O Lord, and I confess it to You; I know that You will take it into account, and so I must learn to think in accordance with Your logic». <sup>13</sup>

13. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.7: «It is not proper that human evil be a spectacle to God, nor *our lifespan*, which has been defiled by sins, be seen by His pure countenance, and this is why Moses added the second part of the verse to the first, so that the meaning may be as follows: “Because it is fitting for You to have good things in Your sight, but iniquity is not worthy of being seen by You, therefore, make humanity to be such that it may not be unworthy of Your inspection, but let our years become worthy of being seen by you, since at present *all our days are faded away*. For not to be in You is not to be at all» (trans. R. Heine, 105-106).

9 *For all our days are faded away,  
and in Your wrath we have fainted away;  
our years have, like a spider,  
spun out their tale.*

The phrase *for all our days* is an affirmative statement, it denotes something certain. «This is the truth, my God: *all our days are faded away*. We are lost. All our days have been wasted, all our years are gone; all that we have done was for nothing, because in the end we die, and we die because we are separated from You. That which gives meaning and value to life is found only in our relationship with You». *We have fainted away*. Why? *Because of Your wrath*.

*Our years have, like a spider, spun out their tale* – this is a striking image of the passage of time, of the history of every human life. We have passed the years working, toiling, and spinning out our lives, like a spider. The phrase *spun out* (*ἐμελέτων*) means to be intensely focused on something, totally engrossed in it. Yet all of our concerns, our desires, all our thoughts and dreams, are nothing more than the work of a spider.<sup>14</sup> We labor, but as the spider la-

14. The image of the spider web (or cobweb) is used by the Church Fathers to denote fragility and transience, cf. St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 31.5 on Matthew*: «Learn the difference between this present life and the one which is to come: whereas this life is but a shadow and a spider's web, the world to come is immortal and unchanging» (PG 57:364A); id., *Homily on Romans*: «The praise of the world is purchased by men of a servile mind by means of ill-gotten wealth and the debased coinage of flattery; such honorific laurels are like crowns of grass woven by children at play, and so you have only to think of the *theater of angels* (cf. 1 Cor 4:9) to see that your so-called admirers are more lowly than worms, and their praise more unsubstantial than a spider's web» (PG 60:571B); and Romanos, *On the Rich Man and Lazarus* 30.14: «Wealth has passed like a spider's web and a shadow; like grass that

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bors over its web, which is a loom of insubstantial filaments, lacking permanence or significance. That's how our time has been spent; that's how our days have passed and *faded away*. Thus the words *faded away* and *fainted away* refer less to the experience of biological death than to the survival of our works after our death.<sup>15</sup>

«*Our years, like a spider, have spun out their tale*. We have created something that has no value in Your eyes, which is not worthy of You, for it is nothing. I labored every day of my life, with my hands, with my mind, I worked hard; I thought I was making progress, that I was on the way to the Promised Land. But because I sinned, my life had no meaning before You. Anything that has value to You has objective value, and objective meaning. But what I thought was my happiness, what I considered to be my joy; the things that filled me with energy and enthusiasm, were in fact repugnant to You; they were things from which You could only turn away Your face. I failed, Lord, because I separated myself from You».

We can also think about the image of the spider in other contexts. Spiders usually appear in ruined places, old places, places

has sprouted on a rooftop, or like a ship that has sailed across the sea, leaving behind no trace of itself» (SC 114:292).

15. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *ibid.*: «Life is unsubstantial and shadowy, like the thread of a spider's web, for the one over whom the power of wrath prevails. For just as that thread is visible so long as chance may preserve it, but if someone touch it with his hand it perishes immediately, wasted by the touch of the fingers, so too that human life, which is always being woven from unsubstantial ambitions, like so many ethereal threads, is weaving a non-existent web for itself. If someone assails this web with solid reasoning, the vain ambition escapes his grasp and disappears into nothing. For everything ambitiously pursued in this life is a conceit and not reality. Honor is a conceit, as is also rank, family nobility, pride, pretension, wealth, and all those things in short which the spiders of life practice» (trans. R. Heine, 106).

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that have been abandoned, like a ruined monastery, or one which has been neglected, in which no one takes any interest.

«*Our years, like a spider, have spun out their tale.* Our years have gone by without substantive study and reflection. All our interests have been trivial. All our attention was on human things, on how to establish ourselves in a land *flowing with milk and honey* (Ex 3:8, 17), not on how to reach You, or get closer to You. We forgot that You called us, that You wanted us to be with You. We thought only about seeing the Promised Land. Yet this too is a human thing, a mere patch of ground, a bit of desert. It is not the place where You dwell, not the place where Your interests are. It is a place of exile. It is a foreign land. What we should have done was to *hang up our instruments on the willow trees and refuse to sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land* (cf. Ps 137:2-4). Yet we continue to sing our songs without the slightest sense that we are exceedingly far from You».

The only kind of work or activity that has real, lasting significance, which does not amount to a shroud of cobwebs, is work that has You in mind, that is directed toward You, that is undertaken because of You. This kind of work carries me, not into the desert, not off to a foreign land, not to a temporary home, but to the true, abiding land of Canaan, which is where You are.

Any activity or effort that is solely human is weaker than a spider's web. As soon as you touch it, it will fall apart. Such work has no foundation, no substance, for it is not work undertaken in and for God. Another way of thinking about this is to say that God Himself would not undertake just any kind of work. The kinds of activities that God would undertake are significant, that is, what He would choose to study, what He would turn His attention to and work on, what kinds of things He would make with His own hands. What God would do with His own proper energy, His grace, is something that would have lasting, objective value. But



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as for me, no matter what I do, even if it's the best I'm capable of, is not very different from the work of a spider. The spider works night and day. It gets up early in the morning and tends to its web. It stays up late, working through the night, and when it wakes up again in the morning, the web is still there. It never ends. Brush away the web at night, and by morning a new one will be there in its place. Day and night the spider toils, ceasing only when it ceases to exist, without ever actually bringing its work to completion.

«That, O Lord, is what my life's been like. But how different would it have been had You been *telling the tale*, had You come and toiled by my side. But I separated myself from You. For me, You no longer exist, even though You are from *forever to forever*».

10 *As for the days of our years, they are but seventy years,  
and if we have strength, perhaps eighty years,  
and what is more than these is toil and travail.*

How do we connect this verse with what preceded it? «Lord, our accomplishments have proved to be lacking in substance and stability, they are devoid of significance. Look at how many years have passed. Yet even if we had thousands of years, the results would not be very different. Indeed, they would probably be much worse, since we live *but seventy years* or *perhaps eighty years* and most of these are spent *in toil and travail*. If You were to look closely at our life, You would see that it is an anguished emptiness, a mirage generated by a desert of barren desire. Egypt is not so much a place as it is a state of mind, a condition of the soul, and it has become our daily reality and experience.<sup>16</sup> And the result? A

16. See Origen, *On Exodus* 1: «If you wish to turn from the grace of baptism to the deeds of the earth, know that a “king of Egypt” has arisen within you,

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moldering cobweb that will be swept away forever. Why, then, did You call us into existence?»

*For meekness has come upon us,  
and we shall be chastened.*

Here the word *meekness* (or «gentleness») has exactly the opposite meaning, since it's used here as a kind of euphemism: it means «anger» or «wrath».<sup>17</sup> But what appears to us to be a euphemism is simply Moses speaking objectively, framing his experience from the point of view of God. «It seems that You are punishing us, putting us to death, but I want to believe that Your “wrath” is actually “meekness,” that it is the form taken by one of Your many visitations to us. Your “wrath,” the deathblow You seem to have dealt us, will in fact lead us back to You, closer to You. And so *we shall be chastened*, and even now we are chastened, even now we

compelling you to labor in bricks and mud. It is he who leads you by whips and blows to worldly works so that you may build cities for him. It is he who makes you run about through the world to disturb the earth and sea in your lusts. It is this king who makes you rush to the courts with lawsuits and weary your neighbor for a little piece of land, to say nothing about lying in ambush for chastity, to deceive innocence, to commit foul things at home, cruel things abroad, shameful things within your conscience. When, therefore, you see yourself acting in these ways, know that you are a soldier for the king of Egypt, which is to be led by the spirit of this world» (FOTC 71:234).

17. English renderings of the Hebrew read: «They (i.e., our years) are soon gone, and we fly away soon», or «For swiftly cut down, we fly off», and «For it is quickly gone, and we fly away» (cf. Job 20:8: «Man will fly away like a dream, and not be found»), but such renderings are slightly tenuous since the verb («gone» or «cut down») is masculine singular and thus does not readily attach to the first-person plural subject that follows. The Greek translation of Symmachus says: «Having been suddenly cut off, we fly away».

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suffer, for Your wrath *has come upon us*. But if we consider it with Your way of thinking, it is *meekness*, a divine visitation, the sign of Your presence». <sup>18</sup>

Another interpretation is available to us, in which the word «meekness» signifies the weakness of man in old age, his loss of strength, and his humbling under various infirmities. We may therefore see it as an image of the decline of the mental and physical powers of the Hebrews, who entered the land of Canaan in a reduced, beleaguered state, and only after the first generation had grown old and died (cf. Num 14:26-35).

11 *Who can know the strength of Your wrath?*

*And out of fear of You, who can recount Your anger?*

12 *So make Your right hand known to me,*

*and to them that in their heart are instructed in wisdom.*

How should we understand the phrase *the strength of Your wrath*? Even though someone experiences what he thinks is the «wrath» of God, it is nonetheless the presence of God's *meekness*, of His gentleness with us, which does not mean that it is any less harrowing for the one who experiences it. For he experiences it as death, as a dying, and so he cries out: *Who can know the strength of Your wrath?* «For me, O Lord, Your gentleness is like wrath, like burn-

18. Compare St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, *On Prayer* 40: «The will of the Lord is not made known by book learning, but by a spiritual grace, which enlightens the intellect to understand the truth. Scripture says: *Who can know the strength of Your wrath?* (Ps 90:11), but spiritual wisdom within me says: «Who can know the strength of Your love, or from Your works reckon the nature of Your ardent desire?» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:325).

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ing anger. Who can fathom its depths? Look at what Your wrath does: it has filled the land with dead bodies». <sup>19</sup>

«Who can understand or explain the true meaning of Your wrath? How can I understand that the meaning of Your wrath for me is nothing other than my own resurrection? And that the outcome of all this is that *I shall see these dead bones rise, and their flesh come back to them!* (cf. Ezek 37:4-8). This is the *strength* of Your wrath, this is Your power. How can man understand it? Who has wisdom enough to encompass it?»

*And out of fear of You, who can recount Your anger?* «Who can count up the effects of Your anger? Who can conceive of the extent of Your anger against sin? I see my sin, but when I'm falling, when the ground is crumbling beneath my feet, it is no easy thing for me to comprehend the deeper meaning or the ultimate purpose of your actions, that they in fact constitute my "refuge." Had I but the wisdom to understand this!» <sup>20</sup>

*So make Your right hand known to me, and to them that in their heart are instructed in wisdom.* «Enable me to recognize, to feel deeply and acknowledge that this situation is nothing other than the visitation of *Your right hand* (cf. Pss 18:35; 63:8), Your

19. Thousands of Israelites died in the episode of the golden calf (Ex 32:28); thousands died in the revolt of Korah (Num 16:31); and thousands were bitten by the poisonous serpents (Num 21:6).

20. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.7: «Here he notes another way that God may be merciful to humanity. The meaning of what he says is as follows. The mass of our sins brings on a great retribution, although it does not proceed to the transgressors according to what they deserve. But even if that which is brought upon us as retribution be *mild*, it will be sufficient *for correction* for those who endure it. If, then, *meekness* of repayment is sufficient for both *correction and retribution*, *Who will endure the strength of His wrath?*» (trans. R. Heine, 106-107).

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presence and activity in my life, the gift of Your grace». The «right hand» signifies the presence of God. It is not grace which has not yet acted, but grace in action. It signifies, then, the actual presence of God.<sup>21</sup>

*So make Your right hand known to me.* Moses describes God as One present in their midst. He is present in the midst of the dying, whose bodies will turn to dust in the desert. He is present in the midst of the new generation, which was born in the desert and destined to enter the land of Canaan. Not least, He is present to Moses, who shall die outside of that land, without ever having entered it. God is in their midst, His *right hand* is at work, arranging everything. He raises one man up, and sets another aright; even now He is leading the people. This is the meaning of *so make Your right hand known to me*: «Enable me to see that even now You are here in our midst, and that Your *right hand* is pointing to the road that leads to Canaan, but in a way consistent with the deeper meaning of things, namely, that our true *place of refuge* is You, in whom I must continually abide if I am to live».

*So make Your right hand known to me, and to them that in their heart are instructed in wisdom.* «Give to our people, O Lord, who have received Your instruction, the gifts of knowledge, understanding, illumination, and especially Your spirit, so that these may lead us forward on our journey».<sup>22</sup> Here the Hebrew text says

21. See above, Psalm 63:9 (chap. 1); and Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 62, n. 6.

22. See St. Hesychios the Priest, *On Watchfulness* 187: «Let us live every moment with *our hearts instructed in wisdom* (Ps 90:12), as the psalmist says, continually breathing Jesus Christ, the power of God the Father and the Wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:24)» (*Philokalia* 1:195). The elder comments on this text in his *On St. Hesychios*: «How should we live our lives? By “instructing,” that is, by shaping our hearts with spiritual wisdom, by communing

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something beautiful: «Teach us to number our days», or «Instruct us to count our days rightly». That is, «teach us, O Lord, to give our lives meaning. Help us to learn that our lives will be true only when we live them with You, when we live them for You». Already the psalmist has been led from the heart of the tragedy that surrounds him to an awareness of God's presence, which is gentle and *mild*. Around him, all is in ruins. But in the midst of the people stands God. And so Moses finds courage, for he is the *man of God*, who walked with God and spoke with Him. He perceives God's *right hand*, His divine activity, and so he says:

13 *Come back, O Lord! How long? —  
and have pity on Your servants.*

«You are with us, Lord. Help us to feel Your presence; let the people sense Your presence among them. For their sake, O Lord, *come back*. It was our fault You left, because we sinned. Formerly it was You who cried: “*Turn back, sons of men.*” But now it is I, moved by love, who say *come back, O Lord*. Come back to us, for we are incapable of coming to You, unless You give us the grace to do so, unless You act. *Come back, O Lord! How long? How long shall we suffer? How long shall we languish and die outside the land of promise? How long shall we dwell in this empty desert? Have pity on Your servants, O Lord, for they are falling*» (cf. Ex 32:11).

with and being absorbed by God. For it is ultimately God Himself Who will shape our hearts, when we live in silence, tranquility, and sobriety. “Wisdom” is in reality Jesus Christ, the *power and wisdom of God* the Father (1 Cor 1:24). Thus we live with the wisdom of the Father by “breathing” Jesus Christ. Do you see how he joins the two ideas? When the intellect contemplates divine wisdom, we have the Father, and through the Jesus Prayer we breathe the Son» (567).

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«If, as we said earlier, our life is but a morning, fill us with Your mercy from the first moment of the dawn, even before we think to ask for it, and so:

14 *In the morning we were filled with Your mercy, O Lord,  
and we rejoiced and were glad in all our days.*

«For all the days of our lives we shall be filled with joy and gladness. Our days will no longer be *of no account*, no longer objects of contempt, no longer withering grass, no longer a shroud of spider webs, but days of life, in which we shall *rejoice and be glad*».<sup>23</sup>

15 *Let us be glad for the days in which You humbled us,  
the years we saw evil.*

«We suffered for so long! We suffered so many things! In the same degree that we suffered, grant us now Your grace. For the same number of years that we wasted in vain, as if in a dream, give us now something lasting and real».

16 *And look upon Your servants,  
and upon Your works,  
and guide their sons.*

23. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.7: «Since Moses has already obtained the grace and seen the light by which the darkness of those who go astray in life is illuminated and whence also the day of virtue begins, he says, *In the morning we were filled with Your mercy, and we rejoiced and were glad in all our days*. For the joy we have in You has superseded the time we spent in the lowliness of sin, and the years of evil have passed away» (trans. R. Heine, p. 107).

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At this point, Moses turns very personally to God. It's as if after a long absence he at last has God again before him, and is once again in possession of his former intimacy and boldness of speech. He had confessed his sin, declared his guilt, entered into full consciousness of his true situation, and God immediately raised him up. Now he can speak to Him freely, with familiarity. «God», he says, «*look upon Your servants*, who are the work of Your hands». Here the word «look» indicates how palpable God's presence is to him; it reveals the extent to which God is his «dwelling place», how much he lives in the presence of God.

*And guide their sons.* That is, guide them all, young and old, into the land of Canaan. Guide them to Your side. «To guide» means to be in the lead, to travel at the head, and provide direction. «Yes, my God, You are among us. I see You; I feel you. And now I beg You: stand at our head, as You did so many times before as a bright cloud and a pillar of fire» (cf. Ex 13:21-22).<sup>24</sup> Become once again our guide, lead Your people forward, for they must advance».

The same idea is repeated in the next verse:

17 *And may the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us,  
and guide aright the work of our hands,  
and the work of our hands guide aright.*

*May the brightness of the Lord our God and his mercy, be upon us –* «May the love of God be upon us», as the Hebrew says.<sup>25</sup> In order

24. On the «cloud» and the «pillar», see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 99, 177.

25. Other renditions of the Hebrew say «Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us», or «Let the sweetness of the Lord our God be upon us».



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to show that he is not speaking of just any kind of activity, but of the activity of the personal God, he says: *may the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us*. The «brightness» of God is His shining manifestation, His glorious presence, which is filled with brilliant magnificence.<sup>26</sup> It is the glory of God. It is God Himself, Who appeared to the children of Israel: *God is the Lord and has appeared unto us* (Ps 118:27). The God of Israel is the God Who «is seen».<sup>27</sup> The «brightness» of the Lord discloses the Lord Himself, Who appears with such brilliant radiance.

*And guide aright the work of our hands.* «Grant, O Lord, that whatever we do will no longer be our own work, but Yours; that

26. Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *Natural and Theological Chapters* 76: «According to St. Maximos, “Moses and David and whoever else became vessels of divine energy by laying aside the properties of their fallen nature, were inspired by the power of God,” and “they became living icons of Christ, being the same as He is, by grace rather than by assimilation” [PG 91:297A, 1253D]. He further says that “the purity in Christ and in the saints is one” [33A]. As the divine psalmist chants, *May the brightness of the Lord our God be upon us* (Ps 90:17). For according to St. Basil, “Spirit-bearing souls, when illumined by the Spirit, both become spiritual themselves and shed forth grace upon others. From this comes foreknowledge of future things, understanding of mysteries, spiritual gifts, citizenship in heaven, likeness to God, and the desire of all desires, to become god” [*On the Holy Spirit* 23]» (*Philokalia* 4:381; cf. 397).

27. In Genesis 32:28, Jacob’s name is changed to «Israel» (cf. Gen 35:10), which was understood to mean «the seer of God». Compare Philo of Alexandria, *On the Migration of Abraham*: «Jacob is the name belonging to one wrestling... but when deemed capable of seeing God, he shall have received the new name of “Israel”» (LCL 4:249); and St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On Matthew* 2.6: «Israel was first called Jacob, because he “saw” the heavenly ladder, and wrestled with the one who “appeared” to him, and who said: *Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel*, which means “the mind that sees God”» (ed. J. Reuss, TU 61, frag. 11).

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You Yourself will be *the work of our hands*. You have come into our midst in order to work, because our own work is the labor of death. But Your work is eternal, everlasting, for it is the work of life». Just as the psalmist began with familiarity toward God, with a strong sense of God as his «refuge», so too does he end. Now the Lord Himself is present. It is the Lord of light, the Lord of glory, Who makes of Himself a fitting place of shelter, a refuge, a home, just as He *guides the work of our hands aright*.<sup>28</sup>

While the Israelites were in the midst of a crisis, Moses struggled to maintain leadership over the community. And he did this in virtue of his greater awareness of their position, of his consciousness of his people's special calling, for he knew that everything that was happening was but the sign of God's presence; that the events of history were but to them the words and sentences in his dialogue with God.

Moses knows that his life is sheltered in God (cf. Col 3:3), and that God is the *beginning and the end* (Rev 21:6). His sense of things is entirely spiritual. At no point does he cease in his forward movement to God: not in Egypt, not in Canaan, and not even in the face of sin.<sup>29</sup> He is truly the leader of the people and an image or type of God Himself. He leads in the name of God. And

28. The Hebrew says «Firmly establish the works of our hands», and the verb *konen* («firmly found» or «establish securely») is typically used for keeping buildings unshaken. To the fleeting nature of human existence, which withers like grass, God alone can give solid substantiality.

29. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 225-226: «If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward ascent, the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher... For this reason we say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course» (trans. A. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 113).

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this is why he lives his life so intensely with God, why he strives to make God the foundation of his life: so that he might be the foundation of his people in God.

There is a sense in which only two things exist: the self and God. And if God is to be the foundation, I am confronted with an ultimate choice: my self or God. If my «I» prevails, my journey will be a descent into death. If God prevails, then our life together may begin. The choice between God and the ego is the choice between life and death.<sup>30</sup> Anyone who wishes to live a spiritual life must accept the fact that such a life will be a struggle, a fight to the finish. I'm in one corner and God is in the other. One of us will be defeated, knocked down, obliterated. It is not possible for both of us to survive. One of us must be destroyed, annihilated, ravaged and consumed by the other. Thus we have a paradox: if I win the fight, my life will be –I myself will be– the absence of God, devoid of God. This is why we said earlier that sin is separation from God, a violent cutting out of God from the heart. And there is no middle ground: you will either live or die. The choice is between God and darkness, between light and the absence of light, which we call night and death.<sup>31</sup>

My life has true objectivity, my history ceases being fictive, only to the extent that I am conquered and consumed by God. History is written, the people are led, and the soul makes progress, only to the extent that God's presence is manifest. For it is God Who undertakes to write the story of my life, to form and fashion my being, which is not fashioned at some particular moment, but

30. This is a recurring theme in the elder's teachings; see, for example, the conclusion to chap. 4 (above); and *The Way of the Spirit*, 8-12.

31. As will be made clear below, this passage is inspired by Jacob's struggle with the Lord (Gen 35:25-31).

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is being continually fashioned. Whatever has not been made by God, that is, whatever I make, even if it's with all the power of my will, with all my good intentions, is nothing more than a cobweb. It is destined to be swept away; condemned to die. It is something that is done in a condition of *alienation and exile* (cf. 1 Pet 2:11). The hymns of the Church say that the «martyrs spilled their blood and gained heaven». Our blood, however, and our sweat, and all our toil, are poured out in futility on the sand, on the earth, which is a stranger to heaven. What we build here, in this life, is of no significance. What matters is what we are building for ourselves in heaven.

My greatest accomplishment, my greatest success, my greatest glory is essentially a momentary sigh. It's really something painful, an ill-fitting mask that hides all the pain and suffering of my life. Yet even this is like a yesterday that has passed. For me it may feel like a thousand years, but in reality it's nothing. The only thing that remains, the only thing that lasts forever, is whatever was made by the right hand of the Lord, what God Himself has brought about, and whatever brings about my return to Him.

The experience of the ages tells us one thing: spiritual life is a struggle with God, figured in the wrestling of Jacob (cf. Gen 32:24-30). But as we said a moment ago, this is no ordinary fight, for if Jacob wins, he will die. If, on the other hand, God wins, then Jacob will live. Thus the victory of God, which is the defeat of Jacob, is in the end Jacob's victory too. Yet this strange victory is nonetheless the defeat of God; it is God's gift of Himself, His humble dispossession of Himself, which is an infinitely rich emptiness (cf. Phil 2:7) that fills Jacob with the glorious presence of God, just as it fills all those who find their life by losing it (cf. Mt 16:24-25).

The final, ultimate feeling, the ultimate experience that a spiri-

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tual person has, is not a momentary sigh, but an ecstasy. It is the vision of God. It draws to itself the most powerful mode of human perception: the sense of sight. Whatever impresses itself on the eye proceeds deeply into the innermost depths of the soul. Everything begins with vision. If your eye is darkness, your whole being will be darkness (cf. Mt 6:22-33). But if your eye learns to see God, then you will live in God, and God will become all things for you, and all things will become light.

How wondrous is His light! Like a bright light that beckons to you, calling you out of darkness into being. You can't take your eyes off it; its brightness overcomes you; it doesn't let you see anything else. It's as if you're in utter darkness, and all of a sudden a bright light shines in your eyes. It will arrest your vision, you won't be able to take your eyes off it, you won't be conscious of anything else, but at the same time you'll have to close your eyes; though you're flooded in light, you won't be able to see anything in this world.<sup>32</sup>

This is what happens in the life of a spiritual man. This is what waits at the end of the struggle. It is a closing of the eyes, a sealing of the senses, and at the same time an opening of our inner eyes to the brightness of the manifestation of the Lord. When someone has attained to this, *then* he can say that he is alive, that truly he

32. See St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Texts* 35: «The person blind to the One is utterly blind to everything; but he who sees in the One contemplates all things. He abstains from the contemplation of all things and at the same time enters into the contemplation of all things while remaining outside what he contemplates. Being in the One he sees all things; and being in all things he sees nothing. The person who sees in the One perceives through the One both himself and all men and all things; hidden in the One, he sees nothing of anything» (*Philokalia* 4:31). See also above, chap. 1, p. xx.

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lived his life. This is not an external phenomenon, but an internal one. It's not something that may or may not happen at some point in the future. It's happening right now, because God is light and life (Jn 14:6). I'm either alive or I'm dead. I've either been resurrected from the dead or I haven't.<sup>33</sup> Is the presence of God—the sense, the feeling of God—something intensely palpable, astonishing, and overwhelming? If so, you have entered the land of promise.

33. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On the Life of St. Neilos*: «I cannot say «one day I will see God». I can only say «I *have* seen God». God has been with us for so many years, so how can we still say that «one day we hope to see Him?» But we cannot say this. Either I have seen God, or my soul is still living in darkness. So instead of asking to see God, we should be asking Him to disperse the darkness of our minds, of our hearts, so that one day He can say: «Finally, My child! At last you have found faith!»» (100).

2 How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord of hosts!  
3 My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord;  
    my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God.  
4 For the sparrow has found herself a house,  
    and the turtledove a nest for herself  
    where she will lay her young,  
    even Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.  
5 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;  
    unto ages of ages they will praise You. selah  
6 Blessed is the man whose help is from You;  
    he has ascents arranged in his heart,  
7 In the valley of tears, in the place that he has appointed,  
    for the lawgiver will give blessings.  
8 They shall go from strength to strength;  
    the God of gods shall be seen in Sion.  
9 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
    give ear, O God of Jacob! selah  
10 O God, our defender, behold,  
    and look upon the face of Your anointed one.  
11 For better is one day in Your courts than thousands elsewhere;  
    I have chosen rather to be an outcast in the house of my God  
    than to dwell in the tents of sinners.  
12 For the Lord loves mercy and truth;  
    God will give grace and glory;

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*The Lord will not withhold good things  
from those that walk in innocence.*

13 O Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man that hopes in You.

\*

\*      \*

For the end: concerning the winepresses, for the sons of Korah, a psalm.

The first part of the title, «for the end», is an indication of the psalm's importance; it had to be sung with great care because it speaks of the manifestation of God. The second part, «concerning the winepresses», is a symbolic reference to the churches of Christ. This psalm is therefore a prophecy, a visionary foreshadowing, of the local churches established by the Lord throughout the world for the gathering of humanity into a spiritual harvest.<sup>1</sup>

The words «for the sons of Korah» create in the reader a sense of confident expectation, since all the psalms associated with the «sons of Korah», and indeed with Korah himself, are marked by tremendous power and feeling.<sup>2</sup> One of the things that makes these psalms so compelling is the ease with which the reader adopts the

1. See above, chap. 5, n. 2.

2. The Korahite guild of musicians and singers dominated Temple music in the post-exilic period (cf. 1 Chr 9:19; 2 Chr 20:19; and above, chap. 4, n. 5). All the Korahite psalms (42-49 and 84-85, 87-88) stress that Sion is the mountain on which stands the Temple, the dwelling of the Lord, the King of the world, from which He governs and blesses His people, and indeed all the world. God has chosen the Temple as the place from which to manifest Himself to the world, and thus the faithful long with all their hearts to experience closeness to Him, typically through the practice of pilgrimage.



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voice and perspective of the psalmist. We are told finally that the text is «a psalm», which means that it deals not merely with historical events, but with events in the life of the soul. It is a lyrical poem expressing religious feelings and spiritual experiences.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, in Psalm 84 we have all the necessary supplies and provisions for our journey. Let us begin.

*2 How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord of hosts!*

*3 My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God*

It is often said that David composed Psalms 84 and 42 in the desert beyond the Jordan. He was there, as we know, because he was being pursued by his son, Absalom, after having been betrayed by his counselor, Ahithophel the Gilonite.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Psalm 84 could have been composed after Psalm 42, upon David's return to the Jordan, in a kind of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, when, that is, he returned to the Tent of Witness, the «dwelling» of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, the mention of multiple «dwellings» (literally, «tentings») would indicate both the principal Tent (or «Tabernacle») and the subsidiary tents and other structures around it.<sup>6</sup> But even though Psalm 84 may have been originally

3. On the meaning of «lyrical» in this context, see above, chap. 4, n. 4.

4. See 2 Samuel 15:1-37, 17:1-4, 22-24. Psalm 84 has many parallels with Psalms 42-43 (in general Psalms 84-88 imitate the composition of Psalms 42-49): they share the same metrical structure (although the number of lines is not the same), the same organization, and the same devotion to worship in Jerusalem, though the latter are psalms of exile.

5. See 2 Samuel 19:14-15, 39; 20:3.

6. Compare 2 Samuel 6:17; 1 Chronicles 15:1. Some interpreters identify this

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composed by David, it was adopted at some later point by pilgrims to Jerusalem, and so has become the *par excellence* psalm of pilgrimage. Pilgrims sang this psalm while walking or otherwise traveling to the Holy City, and again when they arrived at its gates and continued on to the Temple.<sup>7</sup>

We have before us, then, the figure of David searching for God in the desert, or on his return to Jerusalem, when he was about to enter the Tent of Witness. Also before us is the figure of the devout pilgrim, setting out from a distant land, making his way to the Temple where he exclaims, *How beloved are Your dwellings, O Lord of hosts!* But whether he is being pursued in the desert or drawing near to the Temple, the psalm speaks of an immediate relationship with the Lord. The divine epithet «Lord of hosts», which means «Lord of armies», may be a reference to recent events in the desert, or perhaps to the larger history of the people.<sup>8</sup> The Lord reveals His might in powers both heavenly and earthly, but we know that here the «powers» in question are the spiritual powers of heaven.<sup>9</sup>

The phrase *how beloved* does not mean that the pilgrim-psalmist loves the actual *dwellings*, but rather that he stands in a par-

as a so-called plural of intensity or sublimity, aligning it with the singular «Your dwelling», or «Your habitation», as found in Psalms 43:3; 46:4.

7. Walking, especially in the context of pilgrimage, is an activity that encompasses the whole person. The steady, rhythmic movement of walking has palpable effects on the condition of the self as union of body and mind, for the one who surrenders himself to the rhythm of pacing experiences himself as whole, as identical with that self.

8. Modern interpreters, who likewise designate this a «pilgrimage psalm» (cf. Pss 120-134), or as a «pilgrimage liturgy at the Temple portal», find the phrase «Lord of armies» to be slightly at odds with the general context.

9. That is, the holy angels.

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ticular relation to them. This is not, in other words, a reference to the subjective feelings of the psalmist, but rather to the nature of the *dwelling*s, which for him are *beloved*—attractive in their own right—and thus they draw him like a magnet. What he has in view, then, is not the *dwelling*s but rather the *Lord of hosts*, just as Isaiah does when he speaks of the «train» of the Lord's garment, or of His «glory», or His «beauty» (cf. Is 6:1-5). In each instance, he is referring to God Himself, and desires to draw near to Him.<sup>10</sup> If, then, the *dwelling*s of God are so attractive, how much more attractive is God Himself? But because it is impossible for the psalmist to describe the beauty of God, he transfers his thought to the place where God dwells.

*How beloved are Your dwelling*s, O Lord of hosts! Again, his focus is not limited to the «Holy of Holies». To be sure, it has its center there, but opens up in a series of concentric circles encompassing the space around the altar, the entire Temple, the various courtyards, and anything else that exists around this magnificent «footstool» of God (cf. Ps 99:5; Is 66:1). All of these are *beloved*, for in each and in all of them the psalmist's soul finds rest.

*My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord.* The verb «to long for» can also be translated as «to yearn for», or by something else of this sort. More precisely, the form of the verb used here, «to long for» (ἐπιποθεῖν), joins the preposition «to», as in «motion towards» (ἐπί), with the verb «to desire» (ποθεῖν), which also means «to love» and «to want». And this is important since what we have here is not generic «desire» but rather a movement to or toward something which is directed by desire. We have, in other

10. On the interpretation of Isaiah 6:1 in this context, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 77-78.

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words, movement in a particular direction, which in this case is a turning to, and an embrace of, God.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this movement is a passage, a progression, a pilgrimage to the *dwellings* of God, indeed to God Himself. In the life of the soul, moreover, this is an endless movement, an endless search; an endless longing to be with God.<sup>12</sup>

*My soul longs and faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God.* It is not by chance that in this verse the word «soul» appears first. The soul is the foundation of existence; it is the ruling, reasoning element in human life. The «heart», on the other hand, gives primary expression to the power of desire, and to the capacity for feeling and sensitivity. The word *flesh*, finally, denotes the presence and fullness of the body. Thus the entire man, the whole of the human person, is unified and resounds in response to the divine presence.<sup>13</sup>

11. The Greek «beloved» (or «lovely») translates the Hebrew *yedidot*, which is associated with the word *dod*, «lover», and *dodim*, «lovemaking», and thus effectively conveys the virtually erotic intensity in the psalmist's longing for the Temple on Mt. Zion; cf. above, chap. 1, n. 4.

12. The soul's movement to God as an infinite progression motivated by desire was given consummate expression in the spiritual theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa, on which see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 91, and 132-133.

13. Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *Triads* 1.2: «Do you not recall St. Paul's statements, *our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within us* (1 Cor 6:19), and *we are the house of God* (Heb 3:6), as God Himself confirms when He says *I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their God* (Lev 26:12; 2 Cor 6:16)? The body is God's dwelling place; it is not something evil. Hence everyone who devotes his life to God calls to Him as David did, saying *my soul has thirsted for You, how often my flesh has longed for You* (Ps 63:1), and *my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God* (Ps 84:2)» (*Philokalia* 4:332).

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If an object of temptation is able to exert its influence on the flesh and draw the soul into its orbit, how much more so can God? If the flesh shares in the fasting and vigils endured for the sake of God, then it can share all the more in His joy. And this is precisely what we see here: the entire being of the psalmist, his whole person –his mind, soul, heart, and flesh– have been caught up and unified in the intensity of his desire for God. There is no part of him that remains outside of this heightened feeling and sensitivity for God, and so all of him feels and *rejoices in the living God*.

*My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God.*<sup>14</sup> Whereas the *longing* and the *fainting away* of the soul indicate divine captivity of the human spirit, the *rejoicing* of the *heart* denotes the realm of human feelings and desires enraptured by God. Between the mind and the heart, between reason and the emotions, there is no separation, no distance, for the psalmist is turned wholly to God. Thus the past tense of the verb «rejoice» conveys the sense of a living experience which is full and complete. It is something unfolding at this very moment, something the psalmist is feeling and which fills him to repletion.<sup>15</sup>

Since the «rejoicing» pertains to the experience of the pilgrim, it also encompasses the notion of «memory». It's as if he's saying, «As I prepare for my pilgrimage, I call You to mind, my God, and my heart rejoices exceedingly, along with my soul and body». More generally, it gives us a sense of the joy that the Jews experienced during times of pilgrimage, when the scattered community would converge upon the site of the Temple. Such pilgrimages could last

14. In the entire Book of Psalms, the divine epithet «the living God» is found only here and in Psalm 42:3.

15. On the word «rejoice» (*ἀγαλλομαι*) in its Biblical context, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 135-139.

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an entire year, taking into account all the preparations that were required, along with the real possibility that one might not return. Thus the «rejoicing» arises from longings and desires sustained over many months and even years. From the perspective of the individual, all of these feelings are recapitulated and concentrated in the joy that he feels as he draws near to *the courts of the Lord*.

In the language of Scripture, the verb «rejoice» is a strong one, and describes the externalization of a profound inner state.<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew says «my heart and flesh *sing for joy* to the living God», or, with a slightly different vocalization, «my heart and flesh *shout out loudly* to the living God». So the whole self, body and soul, participates in the experience of joy and delight, singing and shouting and swaying to the sounds of the choir and clapping hands to the beating of the drum. «My spirit shouts out to You, and so does my heart; my flesh raises a din, and all that is within me thirsts for You; my whole being longs and languishes for You alone. I sigh and cry out with unquenchable thirst, inflamed by the thought that before me is the fountain from which I will drink».

4 *For the sparrow has found herself a house,  
and the turtledove a nest for herself  
where she will lay her young,  
even Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.*

16. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life*: «What does it mean to say that the *kingdom of God is within us*? (Lk 17:21) What else than the gladness which comes from on high to souls through the Spirit? For this is like an image and a deposit and a pattern of everlasting grace which the souls of the saints enjoy in the time which is to come. So the Lord summons us through the activity of the Spirit to salvation through our afflictions and to a sharing in the goods of the Spirit and His own graces, for it says *my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God* (Ps 84:3)» (FOTC 58:152).

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This is what David (or the pilgrim) said as he was drawing near to the Temple, about to begin the final ascent. He can already see the walls. He can also see the many sparrows and turtledoves that have built their nests in the crevices of the Temple's massive, rough-hewn stones.<sup>17</sup> Seeing these small happy creatures causes him to complain: «Why am I made to dwell in a foreign land when these sparrows and doves have their homes in Your Temple? Why must I be deprived of Your presence while they are so richly filled?» The sight of these nesting birds could not leave him unmoved.<sup>18</sup>

*For the sparrow has found herself a house.* At that very moment, he sees a sparrow dart forth from its nest. It has found a home for itself, as has the dove, moaning over its young. And what home is this? *Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.* «You are my King and my God, yet these small birds flit about in Your blessed presence. *Your altars*, which You created for me, are enjoyed every day by these sparrows and doves».<sup>19</sup>

His complaint is clear, and from it we can glimpse the experience of his intense desire; we see the pain that his love causes him, and the gentleness of his feelings for the Lord. «These birds are

17. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.159, notes that in the cornices of the temple of Apollo at Branchidae in Ionia, «swallows and other birds were perched in various nests». One also thinks of the pigeons, popular with visitors, at the church of San Marco in Venice.

18. The Hebrew «joyful singing» in the preceding line may have been the associative trigger for the image of the birds, which provide a poignant focus for the psalmist's longings. Yearning for the sacred precincts, and seeing these happy creatures, he feels like an unrequited lover who can only dream of intimacy with the divine; cf. above, n. 11.

19. For the Church Fathers, the «sparrow» of Psalm 84, which had made its home in the precincts of the Temple, was identified with the «soul, which like a sparrow had been delivered from the snare of the hunters» (Ps 124:7).

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shy, timid little things, and yet they live close to God. Their life is limited, yet they live amidst Your blessings and joy, of which I am bereft». What a marvelous image! It is so expressive, so powerful!

From this small observation, the psalmist is led to something much greater: *Your altars, O Lord of hosts*. Why does he speak of many «altars» when the Jews had only one? (cf. Ex 20:24; Dt 16:21). Just as the «dwelling» and the «court» were poetically multiplied into many «dwellings» and «courts», so too does the one altar become many, in this case to stress the numerous sacrifices that took place upon it. For the psalmist, the entire Temple is a kind of altar, in the sense that every aspect of it bears witness to God, from the threshold of its outermost door to the smallest corners hidden deep within its interior.

*5 Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;  
unto ages of ages they will praise You.*

selah

To understand this verse, it will be helpful to call to mind the Prodigal Son. He realized that, whereas slaves and servants daily enjoyed the good things of his father's house, he —who was the beloved son— was living with swine in a foreign land (Lk 15:12-17). His sense of isolation, of being a stranger in a strange land, became acute when he compared his status as the beloved son to that of his father's slaves and servants. The Prodigal Son's sense of his «sonship» is not exceptional: it is the feeling that all men and women should have of being sons and daughters of God. As the «chosen people» (cf. Dt 26:16-19), the Jews always lived with this special sense of themselves, regardless of the place or country in which they happened to be living. And this special sense was often heightened by comparison to the surrounding nations, or to individuals who were not of the household of faith. The psalmist,



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however, has no need to look so far, for he compares his status with that of the birds, and this moves him to cry out: *Blessed are those who dwell in Your house*. «If these small creatures are happy, how much more so are those that dwell in Your house—presumably the priests and Levites— for *unto ages of ages they will praise You*»,<sup>20</sup>

«Those *who dwell in Your house* glorify You continuously, *my King and my God*». By using the word «king», the psalmist shows that his relation to God is that of a servant before his master, of a creature before its creator. He expresses his subjectivity, one could say, as subjection; as a readiness to give his heart to God wholly and without reservation. But there is more, for the personal pronoun «my» also expresses his status as a beloved son of God.

The psalmist's feelings are so strong that they can only be followed by the «selah».<sup>21</sup> He has arrived at the Temple and the desire for God has overwhelmed him. What more could he possibly say? Nothing. And so words give way to music. But this is no mere pause in his ascent, for as the instruments play, he is approached by the priests and the Levites, the «blessed ones» that dwell in God's house. Their purpose is to see that his ardent desire is properly directed; that he builds wisely on the strong foundation of his experiences; in short that all his feelings find their consummation in God. It is not enough for him merely to have seen birds' nests or even the «holy place» itself: his aim is to see God.

Thus the musical interlude provides an opportunity for the priests and Levites to strengthen and encourage the pilgrim in his

20. Like the birds that sing in the Temple, so the priests and Levites engage in continual service and song; these musical references will be virtualized in the musical interlude that follows the end of the line.

21. On which, see above, chap. 4, n. 19.

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ascent. «You say that *blessed are we who live here in this house*, but we say *blessed is the man whose help is from the Lord*». Having said this, they turn to God in prayer, and their words are heard by the pilgrims about to ascend the Temple steps.

6 *Blessed is the man whose help is from You;  
he has ascents arranged in his heart*

I think these are quite possibly the most beautiful lines in the Book of Psalms. When the heart is in love, it cannot invent new phrases, but borrows those that have been used by others who have been in love. From these, moreover, the heart chooses only the most simple and straightforward. The more simple the phrases, the more powerful they are. This is exactly what is happening here.

*Blessed is the man whose help is from You.* «Happy is the man whom You help, whom You protect and defend, O Lord». It's as if the Levite is saying to the pilgrim, and indeed to all pilgrims: «The simple fact that you have completed your journey, traveling great distances, walking on dangerous roads infested with robbers and highwaymen; that you have crossed the barren desert where food and water were difficult to find; these things alone enable you to understand that you were helped and protected by God. And for that reason I sing: *Blessed is the man whose help is from God*».

Then, without a moment's pause, the Levite turns the pilgrim's attention from those who dwell in the Temple to those who are ascending to it. «Blessed is the man whose help is from the Lord. Blessed is the man who finds his strength in You; who flees to You for refuge and finds it in You. And so blessed are all you who came here seeking God and who have found your refuge and shelter in Him».

The phrase *blessed is the man whose help is from You* contains

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a subtle but significant insight. It doesn't say «blessed is the man whom *You* help», but «blessed is the man whose help, whose strength, whose fortitude, come from *You*». In other words, «blessed is the man who has the feeling of total weakness, and consequently runs to *You* for help». The stress does not fall so much on the idea of «help», but rather on the source of this help, that such help is «from *You*». Yet the idea of divine assistance is secondary to the consciousness of total weakness that is necessary before one can turn humbly to God and ask for His help (cf. 2 Cor 12:10).<sup>22</sup>

*He has ascents arranged in his heart.* Here the word «arranged» means «established» or «set up», in the sense of «being ordered» and «disposed toward a certain end». But who in fact has arranged, who has established, such ascents in his heart? Obviously God. The word «ascents» (or «ascensions») means not only that God Himself established the practice of pilgrimage as a divine law (cf. Ex 23:17; 34:23), but that He placed the desire for it in every human heart, so that all might desire to go and worship God in Jerusalem. This shows that God is not like an ordinary legislator, for whatever He establishes as law is in accord with human desire.

If, however, this is the pilgrim speaking about himself, then the word «arranged» refers to all those who seek assistance and strength from God and so place in their hearts «ascents», that is, desires, longings, thoughts, plans – some of them stretching over

22. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On the Life of St. Neilos*: «Someone who is a genuine ascetic is deeply conscious of his weakness. He understands from the experience of his temptations that all of his «accomplishments» – his asceticism, his purity, his labors, his spirituality, and all the honors bestowed upon him by others – have no value whatsoever. In reality, he has done nothing, for he is *earth and ashes* (Gen 18:27), he is weak. And this is why he turns to God» (142); see also id., *The Way of the Spirit*, 95.

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a period of years – to «go up» and worship in the Temple.<sup>23</sup> What of the phrase *in his heart*? It indicates that this is not a matter of rationalistic thinking, but a question of desire, of deeper levels of feeling and experience, for God is always in excess of what we can know and desire, and so the psalmist's entire soul, his entire being, became a longing for «ascent».<sup>24</sup>

This is why the Hebrew says that there are «roads» or «highways» in his heart.<sup>25</sup> Man dreams continually about what he loves, and thus his heart is filled and possessed by the object of his love. Here the heart is filled with «roads» and «highways» to show that every day he thinks about going up to Jerusalem.

*7 In the valley of tears, in the place that he has appointed,  
for the lawgiver will give blessings.*

If our desire is from God, then God himself will cause it to increase

23. To «go up» was to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, cf. 1 Samuel 1:3; Psalm 122:4; Mark 10:33; Luke 2:42; John 12:20.

24. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 8.1: «The Lord said that the *pure in heart shall see God* (Mt 5:8); they will receive as much as their minds can comprehend. However, the unbounded, incomprehensible divinity remains beyond all understanding. God's exceedingly great glory is endless, as the prophet testifies (Ps 145:5). Similarly, the great David placed *in his heart those wonderful ascents. He always proceeded from strength to strength*, and so exclaimed to God, *You are the Most High forever* (Ps 92:8). To me this signifies that in all the endless ages of eternity the person running to You becomes greater and more highly exalted, always growing in proportion to his ascent through the good» (GNO 6:246).

25. The sense of the Hebrew is most likely «their every thought is on the pilgrim highways leading to Jerusalem» (cf. Jer 31:21). Needless to say, the theme is not the highways, but the real (or metaphorical) walking on them.

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and grow, just as He does in the life of the pilgrim. First God places intense desire in the heart. But that's not enough, since He knows that the pilgrim will encounter many difficulties on his journey. He therefore takes him from the country of his heart's desire to the *valley of tears*, the valley of weeping (cf. Jg 2:4-5). Perhaps God wants him to learn something by seeing places that, because of their difficulties, call forth tears and weeping. But it might also be that God wants to show him, not simply the struggles he must undertake, but also the changes, and different degrees and stages that make up the journey to the height of Sion.

It's sort of like what happens when pilgrims ascend to the summit of Mt. Athos. They walk all day and at night find rest somewhere in the foothills. Though they are tired, they arise very early in the morning, while it is still dark, for the final ascent, so that they might be able to see the sunrise from the peak. Something like this seems to be suggested by the psalmist, who from the *valley of tears* reaches out to the height of heaven, weeping with joy. And his tears are a mixture of sorrow and hope: sorrow since he lives far from God, and hope since he will soon be in the place where God dwells. And so he places «ascents» in his heart.

When you love someone, you like to think about what you're going to do when you see him; how you're going to approach him, how you're going to greet him and embrace him; how you're going to give him the gift that you've bought and wrapped especially for him. The same thing is happening here both on the part of the pilgrim and on the part of God. The heart of the pilgrim is occupied, not by a single «ascent» or a single «highway», but by the entire country, the whole of the Temple, all of Mt. Sion in all its details. God prepares things for the heart, and the heart prepares itself for God.

What do these things mean in the experience of the pilgrim?

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He set out from his native land a long time ago. He made progress. He passed through many places and experienced many difficulties, but now he is drawing near to the *valley of tears*. The Hebrew text presents this to us with some marvelous images.<sup>26</sup> What is the «valley of tears»? It is the dry desert of Palestine watered by the tears of pilgrims. The dry place has become a source of living water, not just because of the psalmist's tears, but also because of the tears of all those who likewise wept and poured out their hearts in that place. With a slightly different vocalization, the Hebrew offers yet another striking image, for it presents the pilgrims «passing through the valleys with *power*», with great speed, with eagerness, on their way to Jerusalem, as the Lord cools them with showers of refreshing rains.

The Jews were hated by all the surrounding nations. Thus when they passed through waterless regions, especially if these lay in hostile territory, they were denied even a single drop of water (cf. Ex 17:8; Num 20:18-21, 21:33; Josh 9:1-2). But what the local people refused to give them, they received in abundance from God, Who showered them with fresh, cooling rain. God is He Who *dwells in the flood* (Ps 29:10), and quenches the thirst of the people and rescues them from the scorching heat of the day.

We see, then, all the difficulties and deprivations that the heart

26. The Hebrew says, «When they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs». Some interpreters want to localize the «Baca valley» in the neighborhood of Jerusalem (cf. 2 Sam 5:23-24). However, «Baca» is also a type of balsam shrub that grows in dry, waterless regions, and thus the «Baca valley» (or «valley of balsam shrubs») may not be a localizable valley near Jerusalem or anywhere else in Israel, but rather a metaphor for a place of drought, misery, or even death. The meaning, then, would be that when people who are moved by desire for God enter regions of death, they transform them into a paradisiacal place flowing with water («a place of springs»).

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must endure before it arrives at the *beloved dwellings of God*. The journey is difficult, and the heart can wither and die along the way, but it doesn't because God helps it; He gave it the desire to leave its home and He gives it the strength to arrive at its destination. But God does not remove the difficulties, the struggles, the harshness of the desert, for it is good for man to experience pain, to struggle in order to deepen his understanding of life, and so to feel fully and perfectly the presence of God.

We saw how the priests and Levites prepared the pilgrim so that he might properly attain to God. They put him in mind of the «ascents» in his heart, along with his difficulties and struggles. And look: now he has arrived at the very altar of God, *for the lawgiver will give blessings*. The One who established the law of «ascents», which is the very desire for Himself, will also give the strength, and the grace, and the blessing for the final ascent. And so:

8 *They shall go from strength to strength;  
the God of gods shall be seen in Sion.*

And so the people of God, despite all their suffering and struggles, despite the hostility of their enemies, despite their long trek across the desert, nonetheless *go from strength to strength*.<sup>27</sup> Contrary to appearances, they always seem to be making a fresh start of it, always to be picking up speed so that they might reach their goal. Unlike ordinary travelers, whose strength diminishes the longer they are traveling, the pilgrims do not grow weary, but on

27. Here the Hebrew can also mean «they go from wall to wall», or «from bulwark to bulwark», offering a concrete image of the pilgrims approaching Sion, and then entering the city, passing through the outer walls and bulwarks surrounding the fortress of Jerusalem.

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the contrary become stronger and walk with steadily increasing strength.<sup>28</sup>

The Hebrew text presents a pattern of ascent, from the beginning of the journey, through the trek across the desert, and finally to Sion, where the people shall stand before God. Here too we see that after so many difficulties, setbacks, and disappointments, they were rejuvenated, renewed, and so arrived before the great altar of God.

*The God of gods shall be seen in Sion.* These are the final words of preparation given to the pilgrim. He is not about to see nesting birds, or walls of stone, or altar tables, or priests and Levites, but rather God Himself, the *God of gods in Sion*. With these words, the purpose of the pilgrimage is set squarely before his spiritual eyes, for his true destination, the ultimate object of his heart's desire, is God. It's as if he's being told: «Behold, God is about to receive you. Do not look for anything else». The words *the God of gods shall be seen in Sion* are very powerful, for they mean that the One Who dwells there will Himself appear and welcome him.

The pilgrims have arrived at their destination, they are in Sion. However, they do not stop there. They ask to see the master of the house, the very Lord of Sion, for their desire is to present themselves to God. And God wants to see them too, to receive them, to welcome them into His home. The journey is over; the pilgrim finds himself in the presence of God. Formerly he saw sparrows and turtledoves, but now he sees the Lord. He is ready to speak to God.

9 O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob!

selah

28. See Isaiah 40:31: «Those who hope in God continually renew their strength; they grow wings like eagles. They run and are not weary; they walk and are not faint».



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The pilgrim has reached the Temple and now expresses the desire of his heart. «You, O Lord, Who are the *God of hosts, hear my prayer*; listen to the voice of my prayer, *give ear, O God of Jacob*. Listen with Your own ears to what I have to say». At this point, the singing of the psalm ceases and again gives place to a musical interlude, the «selah».

10 *O God, our defender, behold,  
and look upon the face of Your anointed one.*

«You, O God, have helped us down to this present day and hour; You have taken up our defense, and in You we found our help and our strength. You have brought us to this holy place. I entreat You then to *behold and look upon the face of Your anointed one*». The direct language here is quite striking, for it's as if he were saying: «Open up Your eyes now and take a good look». The sense of sight is the most powerful of the senses, and it is this intense manner of relation that the psalmist seeks from God. «Open Your eyes, with all your love and affection, and *look upon the face of Your anointed one*, that is, on me who now speaks to You and belongs to You». If David is the author of this psalm, then the «anointed one» is a reference to his royal anointing, to his kingship. If, however, these were words spoken by pilgrims at a time before the destruction of the Temple, then it must be a reference to the reigning monarch. It would be in fact rather natural for someone living far away from his homeland to think about the ruler of the place. «You, then, Who are our defender, look upon the face of Your anointed ruler».

11 *For better is one day in Your courts than thousands elsewhere;  
I have chosen rather to be an outcast in the house of my God  
than to dwell in the tents of sinners.*

«Why have I so greatly desired to be here? Why have I traveled so

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far, and endured so many privations to stand in this place? Because even one single day in Your presence is better than a thousand days outside of Your courts. I would rather live just one day with You, than a thousand in my own home».

*I have chosen rather to be an outcast in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of sinners.* The phrase «to be an outcast» is a powerful one, which in the Greek has the sense of something cast aside, rejected, thrown away. «I prefer to be thrown somewhere in Your house, anywhere, even into the most remote, obscure corner». The Hebrew is even more emphatic, and conveys the sense that it would be «better to be among the beggars, the blind, and the lame that crowd around the Temple courtyard, than to live in the tents of wickedness».

12 *For the Lord loves mercy and truth;  
God will give grace and glory;  
The Lord will not withhold good things  
from those that walk in innocence.*

What God seeks from me is something entirely spiritual. The sacrifice that He wants from me is a sacrifice of the heart. *The Lord loves mercy and truth*, and mercy is not so much an expression of «love» as it is an act of «sacrifice», since it calls for me to sacrifice, not something I think I need to «give up» for God, but to surrender my very self; to make of my self an offering.<sup>29</sup> *I desire mercy and not sacrifice* (Mt 9:13), says the Lord. «I want you to sacrifice your self, not bulls and cows and other such things. I want you to give me your very own self, just as it says, *My son, give me your heart* (Pr 23:26); and I want you to have faith in Me, for without faith you can do nothing» (cf. Jn 15:5).

29. See St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 1.4: «Let us sacrifice ourselves to Christ, for we have nothing better or greater to give Him» (SC 247:76).

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The word «truth» when used in respect to God is a reference to His faithfulness, His trustworthiness; it is faith in the fact that the Lord will do what He said He would do. «I will give you exactly what I have promised to give you. For your part, give Me your self; give Me your trust, and I *will give you grace and glory*».

*The Lord loves mercy and truth.* If I love «justice» it means I am just. If I love «sacrifice» it means I make sacrifices. Instead of the words «mercy» and «truth» the Hebrew says «sun» and «shield», so that altogether the line says «For a sun and shield is the Lord».<sup>30</sup> As if God were saying: «I am your sun; your life begins with Me. I am your shield, your protection, as you yourself acknowledge. I am faithfulness, I am your fortress. I am He who protects and shelters you. I give you life».

*For the Lord loves mercy and truth; God will give grace and glory.* «All things begin with Me, for I am your life and your protection. You will give Me your self and your trust». Man «gives» mercy and love by denying himself. And what does he get in return? Glory. What is «glory»? It is the reflection of God Himself. God glorifies man; He gives man a share in His own glory; He reveals His glory to man and makes him able to participate in it. When man offers «truth», which is the true knowledge of God given by God Himself – and which cannot be separated from a life lived in accord with the will of God and His commandments – he receives «grace», which is the extension, the projection, the outpouring, the bending down of God to the level of man. God gives His bless-

30. If this particular vocalization of the Hebrew is correct, it would be the only instance of the «sun» serving as a metaphor for God in the Book of Psalms, where the sun is a created thing that is ordered by God (Pss 74:16; 136:8) and which praises Him (Ps 148:3) (but cf. Ps 89:36). However, the word «light» occurs frequently, especially of the Divine Face in theophanic or gracious manifestations in the Temple to worshippers, cf. Pss 4:7; 27:1; 36:10; 43:3; 44:4; 89:16.

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ing, His grace, which glorifies His creature and makes it Godlike. In other words, He gives Himself to it.

*The Lord will not withhold good things from them that walk in innocence.* The psalmist is certain of this. Whatever else a man might do, however he might live, if in the end he walks in the direction of God *in innocence*, in the way that David walked, God will give him all *good things*. God will not withhold His blessings, but will give them in abundance, for He eagerly yearns *to open His hand and fill us with good things so that the face of our soul might be renewed* (Ps 104:28, 30).

13 *O Lord God of hosts, blessed is the man that hopes in You.*

Blessed is the man whose only hope, whose only interest, whose only desire, is God.

In our reflections on Psalm 84, we saw how God prepared the people of Israel to approach His presence. God continues to carry out the same preparations in the heart of every man and woman, to the extent that this is possible for each. If we don't sense or feel this, it is due to our weakness.

At the beginning the psalmist spoke about the *beloved dwellings*. Does our heart feel the power of attraction of God's dwellings? Do we feel the power of God's attraction? Where is our true dwelling? In whom or what do we have our habitation? Where does our heart find its rest? Has our pilgrimage, our journey from Meteora to Mount Athos been a truly spiritual pilgrimage?<sup>31</sup> Has it been

31. In 1974, the elder and his monks moved from the Monastery of the Transfiguration at Meteora in Thessaly, to the Monastery of Simonopetra on Mt. Athos; for details, see the introduction to *The Way of the Spirit*, xiv-xv. As suggested in the following sentences, the move was prompted in part by increasing tourism.

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something truthful, powerful, a genuine sacrifice, a surrender to God? Or has it merely been a matter of convenience, a search for peace and quiet, a flight from troubles? If the latter, then we have not responded to God's preparations; we have not followed the «path of ascent» that God has placed in our hearts. It means we followed another path; that we were attracted by something else, some other kind of beauty, but not the beauty of God. We're looking at birds' nests, or at the light of the setting sun reflected off the sea onto the walls of the monastery. We're looking at Sion, but not at God. And you know what a tragic mistake that is.

God asks the pilgrim for his love and his trust, but especially for his own self, and then He will give him His grace and glory. But God does not give back less than He asks for, and so the «grace» and «glory» that He gives are God's own self. However we shouldn't expect to receive anything from Him until we've journeyed to Him like the pilgrim, in a movement of the soul toward union with the Beloved.

It may be the case that we have many «highways» in our heart. But in the end, the goal of our pilgrimage is not a place at all, but God Himself, the God Who «will be seen». Think about how terrible it would be if, after so many years here, we found that He was not «seen» by us, that He did not appear to us, and that His «grace» and «glory» were not ours, were not found within our heart.

Even though God has prepared our hearts for Him, and has sharpened our eyes and ears to see and hear Him, to have immediate contact with Him, there is the real fear that we are busying ourselves not with God but with things «around» God. How appalling to realize that all our work, all our words, all our worship, and all our prayers are nothing more than a preoccupation with the self.

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Long ago God prepared the Temple pilgrims, and now He prepares our hearts. He led them out of the valley of tears, and He has removed us from the world, that great valley of tears, and led us to this Holy Mountain, and this relocation is a preparation, an ascent to the highway, an entry into the outer court of His eternal kingdom, which is the place of His spiritual temple and altar.

If we wish to stay on the path that will lead us to God's presence, let us, like good pilgrims, prepare wisely. The psalmist gave his soul, his heart, his whole being to God; he endured countless dangers, suffered many deprivations, for the sake of the only truly worthy cause: to enter into immediate relation with God; to commune with God Himself and to be filled by Him.

How I would like to see this kind of love, this kind of devotion, this kind of faith, in our own pilgrimage to God.

## Psalm 38 (LXX 37)

A psalm of David. In remembrance, concerning the Sabbath.

- 2 *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,  
nor chastise me in Your wrath.*
- 3 *For Your arrows are fastened in me,  
and Your hand has come down heavily upon me.*
- 4 *There is no healing in my flesh in the face of Your wrath;  
and there is no peace in my bones in the face of my sins.*
- 5 *For my transgressions have risen over my head;  
like a heavy burden they press down on me.*
- 6 *My sores make a stench and have festered in the face of my folly.*
- 7 *I am wretched and utterly bowed down;  
all the day long I go about with downcast face.*
- 8 *For my loins are filled with mockings,  
and there is no health in my flesh.*
- 9 *I am afflicted and utterly humbled;  
I roared from the groaning of my heart.*
- 10 *O Lord, before You is all my desire,  
and my groaning is not hidden from You.*
- 11 *My heart spins around, my strength forsakes me,  
and the light of my eyes, that too, has left me.*
- 12 *My friends and neighbors ranged themselves against me  
and stood aloof,  
and my nearest of kin stands far away.*
- 13 *Those that seek my soul have acted violently,  
and those that want to harm me speak lies  
and plotted deceptions all the day long.*

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- 14 *But like a deaf man I do not hear,  
and like a mute I do not open my mouth.*
- 15 *And I became like a man who does not hear,  
and has no rebuke in his mouth.*
- 16 *For in You, O Lord, I have hoped.  
You will hear me, O Lord my God.*
- 17 *For I said, «Do not let my enemies rejoice,  
when my foot slips, or speak boastful things against me».*
- 18 *For I am ripe for scourging,  
and my pain is before me always.*
- 19 *For I shall acknowledge my transgression,  
and take heed concerning my sin.*
- 20 *But my enemies flourish and are stronger than I,  
and those who hate me without cause grow in number.*
- 21 *Those who pay me back evil for good have slandered me  
for pursuing good.*
- 22 *Do not forsake me, O Lord my God,  
do not stay far from me.*
- 23 *Hasten to rescue me, O Lord of my salvation.*

\*

\*     \*

Early on in life we undergo a kind of spiritual castration. We become eunuchs of the soul, incapable of repenting, incapable of generating anything spiritual. No one escapes this enforced sterilization, this deadening of spiritual life and creativity. But that which was lost can be found again, for *with God all things are possible* (Mt 19:26). Yet if we lack the one essential thing (cf. Lk 10:42), it will be impossible for us to worship God or even feel His presence.

From this condition of sterility arises a dilemma, and thus we



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hear many people asking: Have I confessed my sins properly? Was my confession genuine? Did I say too much, or not enough? And so on. What is the right way for me to confess? Those who ask such questions are suffering from an ambivalence of soul, from inner disunity and division. Their questions reveal that, even though they've gone to confession, all they really did was cover things up; in order to satisfy or appease their moral scruples, they went through the motions of a religious ceremony, so that they might return to doing what they've always done, without any inconvenient pangs of conscience.

As we can see from the title, Psalm 38 is «a psalm of David». In composing this psalm, David's intention was not to produce a work of history or literature, but to give expression to his religious experience. David tells us how he feels, what he experiences, what he sees within himself, how he understands his relationship with God.

In terms of its historical context, Psalm 38 belongs to a group of psalms that David wrote in the wake of some rather disturbing events, including adultery, murder, and political revolution. I am referring of course to his affair with Bathsheba, the killing of her husband Uriah (2 Sam 11:2-27), and the conspiracy of Absalom (2 Sam 15). Despite the appalling things he had done, David went about his business for an entire year without any idea that he had committed serious crimes. When, however, the prophet Nathan confronted him, he awoke to the terrible truth of his deeds, and said: *I have sinned against the Lord* (2 Sam 12:13).

This «psalm of David», then, is the poetic expression of David's repentance. The next element in the title is the phrase «in remembrance».<sup>1</sup> It is related to the phrase «for inscription on

1. The Hebrew «in remembrance» (*lehzakir*) occurs only here and at the

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a pillar», which appears as the title of several other psalms (i.e., Psalms 56-60), and indicates that they were to be inscribed on some kind of memorial stone, where they could be seen and remembered.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Psalm 38 is intended to serve as a monument to David's repentance, a record of his experiences, a perpetual herald of his sins. Think of it as a kind of gesture, like that of a beggar who extends his hand to you, so that you see the thinness of his fingers, his ragged clothes, the sores on his skin, and consequently you feel sorry for him, and want to help him.<sup>3</sup>

beginning of Psalm 70, and suggests a background of sin and confession; compare the words of Pharaoh's cupbearer in Genesis 41:9: «My offences I remember (*mazkir*) today», and those of the widow to Elijah in 1 Kings 17: «You have come to me to call to call to mind (*lehazkir*) my crime».

2. See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.4: «The expression “for inscription on a pillar” (*stelographia*) shows that it is necessary to keep this word indelibly imprinted on our memory, since the memory is the pillar, that is, the memorial monument (*stèle*) of the soul, and on it are inscribed good deeds» (trans. R. Heine, 133); *ibid.*, 2.5: «The meaning of “for inscription on a pillar” is that we must have such a word inscribed on the pillar, as it were, of the memory of our soul, so that in similar circumstances we may act likewise» (Heine, 141); *ibid.*, 2.15: «Just as those who produce the more notable inscriptions on stones cut the characters deeply by frequently applying the chisel with blows to the carving of the letters, so the Holy Spirit contrives, by means of continuous repetition, that this great saying (i.e., 1 Sam 26:9) may become more distinct and quite clear on the pillar of our memory, so that this inscription, having been carved in us distinctly and without confusion, might be well known in time of misfortunes» (Heine, 200).

3. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On the Life of St. Neilos*: «By fasting, vigils, prayer, sleeping on the ground and other hardships, we show our “rags” to God, just as a poor man shows his rags to passers by, so that they might feel sorry for him and help him. In the same way, we too show God our poverty, asking Him to open our eyes, so that we might understand that we are sinners, repent, and receive His forgiveness» (149-150).

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In the same way, David is exposing his pain to God, reminding God of the wretched state to which sin had brought him, but also of the experiences that accompanied his repentance.

There is some evidence that this psalm was sung (or recited) at the «cereal offering», which was a preparation for the blood sacrifice offered for the remission of sins (cf. Lev 2:1-16). When seen against this background, it's as if David is saying, «I open up my heart before You, O God; I am about to make the peace offering, the bloody sacrifice; accept the slaughter of this animal and the pouring out of its blood as if it were my own, for I spill its blood in place of my own, and burn its entrails in place of my own» (cf. Lev 1:1-17).

We can also see the phrase «in remembrance» as something related directly to the life of David. From this point of view, the act of «remembrance» is something that refers primarily to David himself: «I wrote this psalm so that I would always remember who I am. The fact that I confessed my sins does not mean that I am no longer the man I once was. Simply because I said to the prophet Nathan, “I have sinned”, does not change who and what I am. In the same way, the fact that I have become a king does not change the fact that I am the son of a poor woman and a crippled father. I am still the man I was. If God wants to purify my heart, that is another matter; it is His business entirely».

David had come to realize that he was living in sin, that his life was not pleasing to God. Our problem is that we *fail* to come to such a realization, for we too are sinners. Were we to come to such a realization, our names would immediately be written in the book of life, for Christ came to save, not the righteous, but sinners (cf. 1 Tim 1:15). When they repent, sinners, publicans, and harlots enter very easily into paradise (Mt 21:31). But for the person whose pride and superficial piety prevent him from seeing that he

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too is a sinner, repentance is difficult, indeed impossible. Whether such a person will be saved is not easy to say.

What does it mean to be a sinner? It doesn't mean simply that I've committed a particular sin, but that my entire being, every aspect of my self, is entangled in sin, *for in sins did my mother conceive me* (Ps 51:7). From the very moment of my conception, long before I was born, before I ever had an opportunity to commit any kind of particular sin, I existed in a mode of fallen nature, in the fallen Adam, and as such I opened my eyes on a world adrift in evil and wickedness (1 Jn 5:19). Yet I am called to become a «second Adam», a «new Adam» (cf. 1 Cor 15:45, 47); I am called to become a spiritual man according to the example of Jesus Christ. Yet how can I possibly *become* anything when I don't know who or what I am *now*? How can I become a «new Adam» if I've forgotten, or am incapable of seeing within myself, the active presence of the old one?

David, then, wrote this psalm to inscribe within his memory exactly who and what he was. To be sure, this is a psalm that's worth reading and studying every day. If however we have not yet attained to the experience and self-knowledge of the psalmist, we should nevertheless turn to God and say: «God, this is what I am, even if I am still filled with pride and think that I am somebody important». All human righteousness – assuming for the moment that anything we have done could be considered righteous – is in reality *a dirty rag* (Is 64:6). This is something that we have not yet fully understood.

The phrase «concerning the Sabbath» suggests that Psalm 38 may have been read on that day. In the same way that there was an angel appointed to every individual (cf. Tob 12:12-15; Mt 18:10), it is not inconceivable that there was a particular psalm or psalms for each day of the week. The most probable interpretation, how-

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ever, is the spiritual one, so that the «day» in question is the «Sabbath» of the soul, when it will cease from all its worldly toils and come to rest in God.<sup>4</sup>

It follows, then, that this is not a psalm of consolation. It is not the story of a troubled conscience that finds relief after having unburdened itself. Christ did not come to provide us with that kind of temporary psychological experience. He did not come to deceive us. He did not come to hear our confession so that we might feel «relief». Christ came to rescue and redeem souls, to liberate us from bondage to sin, and to lead us to the rest of a new, eternal Sabbath. In this way, Psalm 38 is a prophecy concerning a new Sabbath – the «first of Sabbaths», as the hymns of Pascha say – in which the shadows of the law are overtaken by the light of the Resurrection.

These are the themes that emerge from the psalm's title. They enable us to understand something about the root meanings of repentance, and thus about the obstacles to repentance buried within us. As we proceed with our interpretation of the psalm, we shall see that, in addition to describing the obstacles to repentance, the psalmist presents us with a way to surmount them.

This is a simple psalm, without any obscure phrases or difficult words. We hear it every day in our worship, for it is the second psalm of the «Six Psalms» read during the Matins. It is the prayer of the psalmist, and it begins as follows:

4. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria *On Psalm 38*: «David composed this psalm as a memorial and reminder of the prolonged wretchedness that he suffered as a result of having sinned. He beseeches God to grant him the “Sabbath”, that is, rest from all his sufferings» (PG 27:184). On the «Sabbath of the soul», see St. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 7 (PG 91:1080D-1081A); and id., *First Century on Theology* 36-39, 44, 47 (*Philokalia* 2:121-123).

2 *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger,  
nor chastise me in Your wrath.*<sup>5</sup>

To «rebuke» means to «reprove» or «reprimand», but here the deeper sense is «to call someone to account», to «hold someone accountable», to answer for his conduct, to explain himself. Observe the humility of the psalmist. He does not say «do not rebuke me, O Lord; do not call me to account», but *do not rebuke me in Your anger*. It's as if he's saying: «I know I am guilty God, and that I must give an account of my actions, but let this not take place in anger. Rebuke me in Your love and mercy, as a father would his child. I am a sinner, yet I still feel within myself that I am Your son. You are the Lord and have every right to call me to account, yet I as Your child have the right to appear before You asking for mercy and love».<sup>6</sup>

5. Psalm 6 begins with these same words, which are part of a formalized pattern of supplication.

6. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 38*: «By saying *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger*, David is not asking to forego punishment, only that it not be carried out in anger, just like someone might say to a doctor: “Do not cure me by means of cuttings and burnings and bitter drugs, but by more gentle methods”, for he is not seeking to avoid the cure, only a painful program of therapy» (PG 23:337); St. Basil of Caesarea, *On Proverbs*: «The voice of the righteous is cause for wonder, since it cries out *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger*. They do not refuse rebuke, but ask only that it not be done in anger» (PG 31:396); Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm 6*: «He is not asking to be excused from rebuke, only that it not be done in anger. Neither is he seeking to avoid correction, only that he not suffer it in wrath. Rebuke me like a father, he is saying, and not as a judge; treat me like a doctor would, and not a torturer; don't fit the punishment to the crime, but measure it against Your love for mankind» (PG 80:901).

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*Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger.* «Do not deal with me in a way that is angry or vindictive». David knows the ways of the God, Who said *come and let us reason together* (Is 1:18). «Come here, My child, and let's talk it over. Tell me what you've done», says the Lord. «Enable me, O Lord, to know the depth of my soul, so that I myself might understand it. Ask me whatever You want, but not in anger».

*Nor chastise me in Your wrath.* The phrase *do not chastise me* literally means «do not strike me, do not beat me». Here too we see the beautiful way in which the psalmist thinks, for despite the fact that he has sinned, he does not feel that he has lost his boldness of speech before God, and so he asks Him: *do not rebuke me in Your wrath*. Even though I have fallen down and am lying in the mud, God does not stop being God. Even though I have many vices, God does not cease being virtuous. Thus I have the right to turn to Him, to approach Him just as He is. «This is what I am, this is what I have become. You, however, can't stop being Yourself; You can't be something You're not. Your love and goodness cannot change into something else, and that's why I'm turning to You». If a person has truly repented, he has no reason to fear being disappointed by God. Such a person might appear downcast, but in reality he looks to heaven, he sees God, and says: «Come here, my God, and let's talk; tell me what You want me to do».

*Do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath.* «The martyrdom that You will make me undergo, the punishment that You will inflict upon Me, is in essence a lesson, a form of education. It is the way in which You condescend to my level. I have sinned, and so I need to change, to grow, to learn a new way of living. I have made a mistake and I must be corrected. How will this happen? I must be *chastised, but not in wrath*. How beautiful! He knows that for himself it will be a chastisement, but that for God it

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will be an act of love.<sup>7</sup> The psalmist's petition that God refrain from any «wrath» is also a plea that the chastisement might be brief, since wrath is something that endures over time. Anger boils over and becomes wrath, which takes a long time to cool down. «And why do I ask this of You, O Lord? Because I'm in such a state that, were You to be severe with me, I would instantly collapse».

3 *For Your arrows are fastened in me,  
and Your hand has come down heavily upon me.*

The image of being struck by an arrow reflects the ancient belief that sickness and suffering were «arrows» sent by God (cf. Job 6:4; 16:3; Ps 89:5).<sup>8</sup> This is similar to the belief that diseases were

7. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 6*: «When you read in Scripture of God's "anger" and "wrath", you are to think of nothing human, for these words are a gesture of condescension to human understanding, since God has no share in human passions» (PG 55:71); and Origen, *Against Kelsos* 4:72: «When we speak of God's wrath, we do not hold that it is an emotional reaction on His part, but something He uses in order to correct by stern methods those who have committed many terrible sins. That the so-called "wrath" of God and His "anger" have a corrective purpose, and that this is the teaching of Scripture, is clear from the words of the psalm: *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, no chastise me in Your wrath* (Ps 38:1), and of Jeremiah: *O Lord, correct us but with judgment; not in Your anger* (Jer 10:24). And that God's wrath is not an emotional reaction, but that each man brings this on himself by his sins, will be clear from Paul's words: *Or do you despise the riches of His goodness and forbearance and long-suffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But by your hardness and impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God* (Rom 2:4-5)» (trans. H. Chadwick, 241).

8. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 38*: «Job, having endured a myriad of trials, was not ignorant concerning the source of his troubles, and thus he



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demons, evil spirits, which entered into a person like a poisoned dart or arrow. And so it was common to spit on such people – a practice which survives in the renunciation of the devil at baptism – so that the evil spirits might depart from them. «I have been struck in the heart by Your arrows; they have entered into the deepest parts of my being. Yet it is not enough that You struck me dead center, pinning me against a wall, but Your *hand has also come down heavily upon me*». It's like I've stuck a knife in you all the way to the hilt, so that my hand is in direct contact with your wounded, bleeding body. This is the terrible experience of the sinner, who feels just this sort of violent, crushing weight on him. And this pressure will not abate, for God will withdraw His hand only when He sees in us the fruits of repentance. Until then, I will suffer from the weight of His hand, I will feel the sting of His arrows, and I will drown in the crushing depths of a dark sea.

- 4 *There is no healing in my flesh in the face of Your wrath;  
and there is no peace in my bones in the face of my sins.*
- 5 *For my transgressions have risen over my head;  
like a heavy burden they press down on me.*

If we focus on what is being said here, we'll understand something

said, *the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison* (Job 6:4); and David too, though he was not afflicted bodily as was Job, but was wounded in his soul, said, *Your arrows are fastened in me* (Ps 38:3)» (PG 23:340); St. Basil of Caesarea, *Sermon on Sin*: «It seems to me that what are called “arrows” here are not physical objects but spiritual ones. Surely they are God’s words, which pierce and wound the soul, torturing the conscience of the one who is struck by them» (PG 32:1212); and Evagrius, *On Psalm 38*: «The words of the Lord are arrows, just as the Savior Himself says: *He made Me a polished arrow, in his quiver He hid Me away* (Is 49:2)» (BE11EΣ 80:56).

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about the true meaning of repentance, and how it enabled a man who committed adultery and murder to become a great prophet and a saint, beloved by God.

*There is no healing in my flesh in the face of Your wrath.* In this line, «wrath» is personified; it has a face. In the previous verse, God's anger took the form of a deadly weapon, an arrow. Now it has become something like a violently angry person, bent on doing David harm. The very appearance of this pestilent creature banishes all health; it afflicts the psalmist's flesh, and makes all healing impossible. The psalmist may in fact have had some sort of severe skin disease. Some people say that he was suffering from a disease transmitted through promiscuous behavior. That however seems a bit far-fetched, and the simplest explanation is that this is a metaphor; that a bodily condition is being used to describe an affliction of the soul.<sup>9</sup>

There is no question that the psalmist has something else on his mind. Even if he is suffering from a bodily ailment, his deeper problem is spiritual, and it forcefully affects his whole person. Both his soul and body are in pain. He feels that for him there is no cure, no healing. «God's wrath has fallen heavily on me, it continues to afflict me, and so nothing can help me». In the Hebrew, the words «there is no healing» do not refer to a particular cure or remedy, but indicate that the whole person is unsound; that no part or member of the body is in a condition of health. «My whole body is a massive, bloody wound. Look at me, O God; examine me, and tell me if You find even the smallest part of me that is not wounded and infected. But You won't, since from head to toe *there is no healing in my flesh*».<sup>10</sup>

9. The psalm goes on to evoke a range of physical symptoms: festering sores, inward burning, numbness, bodily contortion, dizziness, as well as the social rejection that such symptoms (understood as a sign of divine displeasure) call forth.

10. For parallel formulations, see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*,

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*There is no peace in my bones in the face of my sins.* The idea that there is *no peace in his bones* seems to be, again, a metaphor for a spiritual illness.<sup>11</sup> What he feels is the pain of sin. «Not only is my flesh suffering, but my bones as well. The pain has penetrated to the marrow, so great was my sin». Previously he spoke of the face of God's wrath, but now he casts the blame on himself. «Forgive me, God, for having spoken in the way that I did. It's not because of You, but because of my sins that I suffer like this. I'm at fault, O Lord, not You».

When a person repents, he becomes conscious of God's love. He does not despair, he does not become miserable, he does not become downcast and depressed. He knows how to stand before God and say: «God, I'm wrong. Tell me what to do, not so that I might pay for my crime» – God does not demand such «payment» from us – «but so that I might be corrected, healed». David acknowledges both his sin and the righteousness of God, and so in these verses he simultaneously corrects himself and removes the burden of guilt from God, placing it on himself. «You are not to blame, O God. Neither is the cause of my pain something in my

241-244; and id., *On Abba Isaiah*: «Sin has opened up deep wounds in man. Wherever you take hold of him, *there is no healing in his flesh* (Ps 38:4); not in his flesh, not in his nature, not in his body, and not in his soul. And there *is no healing* because there is no desire for true liberation from the passions and from sin» (223-224; cf. 458).

11. Compare Origen, *Dialogue with Heraclides*: «When I consider the parts of the body, I see them in a spiritual form in the soul. *Lord, rebuke me not in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath. Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am weak; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled* (Ps 6:1-2). What “bones” of the prophet were “troubled”? The constitution of his soul and the firmness of his mind were troubled, and he pleads for the restoration to health of *those bones*» (ACW 54:73).

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flesh, or in my bones. On the contrary, I am sick, and can find no peace because of my sins».

The majority of illnesses have their causes not in the body, but in the soul. We are sick because we have sinned. And we are sick, not because God is punishing us, but because sickness and suffering are necessary for our correction, for our education and growth. Sickness and suffering are the most direct and effective way for us to enter the kingdom of heaven (cf. Acts 14:22). Thus the person who does not see his illness as his best friend is in danger of remaining outside of paradise. The greater the illness, the greater God's closeness to us, even if the illness has been caused by our sins. If sin is the cause of our illness, we must seek to correct the sin; our focus should not be on curing the bodily symptoms, but on correcting their spiritual cause. If our illness has its source in sin, then the cure, the program of therapy, will be different from the kind we apply when the illness is caused by other factors.

It is certainly possible that the psalmist is physically sick, but it is also possible that he is being consumed by anxiety and worries. «O my God, what have I done! I can find no rest; I cannot sleep at night, for when I lie down *I drench my bed with tears* (Ps 6:7)». How could a person in such a state not suffer? He couldn't eat. He covered his face with ashes. He did all this and more, not to «satisfy» or «propitiate» an angry deity, but in order to restore his relationship with the God of love. Thus he endured various hardships: he went without eating, without sleep, refusing to recline even on the ground. His bones ached. It's as if he's saying: «There is no rest, no peace for me. Even if I were to hasten to physicians, *there is no healing in my flesh*, for the cause of my disease is not in my flesh but in my sins. Thus the only way I can be cured is by the effacement, the rubbing out and utter wiping away of my sins».

With how much spiritual insight and nobility does David

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speak! Such compunction, such a deep recognition of his sin! Yet equally great is his effort to justify God. «My God, it is for You to live; for You to reign. If I am distraught over my sins, it is because they provide an excuse for men to condemn You. This is why I am sick. How can it be that I have tarnished Your glory? May this never be. Therefore I beg You, justify Yourself; prove to the world that You are righteous and just in all Your ways (cf. Ps 51:4)».

With this we encounter the second characteristic of the person who repents. He does not repent simply because he himself has sinned or made some mistake. He does not repent simply because he has fallen, or lost something that he formerly had. He repents because his sins have diminished God's glory in the eyes of men. This is the sign of true repentance; all the rest is mere remorse or regret. Most of our sorrow is not for God, but for our wounded vanity; our despair is merely egotism by other means. True repentance is a change of mind. What does that mean? It means that, whereas I was formerly looking at things in a human way, I look at them now from God's point of view. It means that I leave off thinking about myself, and think instead about God, and it is this change of mind that constitutes my transformation and renewal. The blind disorder that has risen like a dark wave between me and God, and which has diminished God's glory, must be expelled from my life by a flood of light.

*My transgressions have risen over my head.* These words also demonstrate the extent to which the psalmist recognizes his guilt. A moment ago he was speaking of his «sins» and trying to justify God. Now, however, he speaks of his crimes, his transgressions against the law. «My God, You are righteous, You are holy, but I am a criminal, a transgressor». Seen from my own point of view, a «sin» is a mistake that I make, or something that I fail to do; it is my fall from grace. But a «transgression» is my fall as seen from

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the point of view of God. It is a crime committed against God. «I have transgressed» means that I have violated, desecrated, trampled upon, God's law. It means that I have placed myself above that law, and in so doing have stolen God's glory for myself. Thus «my transgressions, my trampling down of the divine law, my tarnishing of the luminous cloud – *have risen over my head*». This is a metaphor derived from the terrible power of the sea, as if rising waves were covering the psalmist's head, pushing him down into the depths of the ocean. He feels like he's drowning. «In this manner, my God, the waves of my transgressions have risen over my head, and there is no hope that I can rise above them, no chance for me to make it back to land».

*Like a heavy burden they press down on me.* This is now a second image. «The water that has covered me is like *a heavy burden, pressing down on me* (cf. Pss 67:3, 16; 123:4). God's hand is heavy, and it has fallen on me with all its weight».<sup>12</sup> In addition to the experience of drowning, of being submerged in the abyss of his transgressions, he wants to describe the feeling of being crushed, of a tremendous pressure on his soul, a heavy burden on his conscience. When he speaks of his sins, he says that *there is no peace in his bones*. When he speaks of his transgressions, he describes the crushing weight pressing down on his conscience.<sup>13</sup> After this he delivers himself of an utterance still more remarkable, for it is the limit to which human self-knowledge can reach:

12. See above, Psalm 88:8 (chap. 4).

13. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance*: «There is nothing quite so heavy as the weight of sin and disobedience. This is why Zacharias described it using the image of "lead" (cf. Zach 5:7-8), and why David said *my transgressions press down on me like a heavy burden* (Ps 38:5). But Christ says, *come to me, all who labor and who struggle under heavy burdens, and I will give you rest* (Mt 11:28)» (PG 49:310).

6 *My sores make a stench and have festered in the face of my folly.*

«*My sores, my wounds, make a stench; they smell terribly, they reek. And not only do they make a stench, but they have festered, being suppurated and filled with vile pus. My entire being brims with pus. My skin, my body, is completely destroyed. I am repulsive to You, O God, loathsome and abhorrent. My soul is a stinking wound filled with pus*<sup>14</sup> But even so, You do not turn away from me; You do not scorn me. *Though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me* (Gal 4:14)». In ancient times, the sick were often scorned and despised; they were considered disgusting and repulsive. Imagine, then, if from head to toe you were a horrible festering wound! With this powerful image, David is describing the state of his soul, the wretched condition into which he has fallen. This is not self-pity or self-centered display, but part of his search for a point of contact with God; for the beginning and principle of his repentance. «God, this is who I am. With brutal honesty I show myself to You. Now, show me Who You are».

No one can comprehend his sinfulness, no matter how great it might be, unless he has glimpsed the holiness of God. This is why David began this psalm by turning to the Lord of love and righteousness, saying: *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your wrath.* The «not» means «no longer», as if he were saying, «that's enough now, God. This anger, this wrath – this is not really You. I know that You are full of love. Don't appear to

14. Modern interpreters point out that that the situation described here is analogous to that of Job. The psalmist has suffered some terrible illness, including visible, malodorous sores, as a result of which his friends remain distant, and others openly revile him.

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me now as something other than what You are». Again, all of this indicates that the «chastisement» has already begun, and so he says «*do not chastise me in Your wrath*. That's enough, God; reveal to me now Your true face».

Think about someone who is extremely angry with you, and who approaches you boiling over in his rage. Your first thought would be to get up and run away.<sup>15</sup> You'd tell yourself that this person neither loves nor understands you. There's no point in sticking around; things could get out of hand. But look how differently David reacts! «My God, even though my bones are aching and my flesh is rotting away; even though I am a massive wound, show me Your true self; show me the One in Whom I trust. You are Holy. You are filled with love, tenderness, and compassion». David's wretchedness stands in contrast to, and derives its meaning from, the love and holiness of God. In simple terms, if you've never seen the color white, you can't really understand black, just as you can't understand the darkness you're in, if you've never seen the light. This is exactly what happens in true repentance.

What is the deeper, underlying cause that keeps us from repenting? Now we have the answer: it is the simple fact that we have not yet come to know God; that we have not yet felt His holiness. And the reason we don't know God is because we haven't bothered to get to know Him. When you like someone, when you're interested in someone, you want to know everything about him. «Tell me, my dear friend, where are you from? Do you have any brothers and sisters? What is your mother's name? What was your childhood like?» And when he tells you all about his life; when he opens up his heart and tells you his troubles, you are moved to shed tears, because you've identified your life so closely with his.

15. The same comparison is made by Evagrius, *On Psalm 38* (ΒΕΠΙΕΣ 80:64).



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This is how we should love God, this is how we should desire to know Him. When we desire to know the love and holiness of God, then we will understand our sinfulness, and be moved to repent.

Consciousness of sin is your point of contact with God. This is the place where you cast your anchor, where you catch hold of something real. But I have no anchor to throw into the sea; no rope to tie me to the shore, for I have no sense of God's holiness and thus no sense of my own sinfulness. But as soon as I recognize that I am a sinner, that connection is made. The rope is tied and the ship of the soul arrives safely at the shore.

*My sores make a stench and have festered in the face of my folly.*

Sin and transgression are folly, indeed sin is the most foolish thing there is. *The fool said in his heart: «There is no God»* (Ps 14:1). To commit sin is the act of a foolish man, a man lacking in true knowledge and intelligence.<sup>16</sup> «God, I am sick and wounded, but in essence I am a fool, and so I beg You to bend down graciously

16. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 38*: «If the soul had not previously fallen into folly, it would never have sinned, and from this you can learn something about the nature of sin» (PG 27:184); St. John Chrysostom, *On the Gospel of John*: «The source and root of all virtue is sober thinking, just as the origin of all wickedness is mindlessness. Thus the arrogant and the wrathful are swept away by passion owing to a deficiency of sober thinking. And this is why the prophet says, *there is no healing in my flesh, and my sores fester in the face of my folly* (Ps 38:6), teaching us that all sin has its origin in folly» (PG 59:238). Chrysostom cites Psalm 38:6 frequently in his works, partly for the moral point it makes (as in the above citation), but also as a description of the corruption of the flesh and the offensive, malodorous nature of sin. For Makarios of Egypt, who also cites Psalm 38:6, the stench of corrupted flesh can only be cured by being «salted by the Holy Spirit» (trans. G. Maloney, 39-40).

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to me. I am not the rebel I appear to be. Yes my sin was an act of rebellion, a separation from You. But I did not have a disposition to sin; my aim was not to rebel. It happened because I wasn't thinking, because my mind was elsewhere, because I am a fool».

This is how David shows his humility. He lowers himself, and yet at the same time expresses his desire to remain close to God. «Don't hold this against me, God, for it was done out of ignorance, foolishness». Whereas the word «folly» indicates the reason why he sinned, David's acknowledgement of that folly reveals that he does not cease to desire to be with God. And this desire is yet another characteristic of the person who has become conscious of the fact that he has sinned.

A person in sin can easily repent. However, a person that has repented and then fallen back into sin has a serious problem. He sins, confesses, and then goes and sins all over again. There are also those that have lived a life of purity, who have come to know God, and then abandoned Him. But the first instance is more serious than the second.

12 *My friends and neighbors ranged themselves against me  
and stood aloof,  
and my nearest of kin stands far away.*

13 *Those that seek my soul have acted violently,  
and those that want to harm me speak lies  
and plotted deceptions all the day long.*

«In their disappointment with me, my friends have removed themselves to the opposite corner, and they are powerless to help me. My enemies, who have sought and who continue to seek my life, spread vicious lies about me; they circulate groundless, malig-

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nant rumors designed to destroy me. They relish the fact that I am in trouble; they wish to see me far from God, so that they might laugh at me. And so they do not cease from their intrigues; their tongues do not cease from slander».<sup>17</sup>

Instead of *they acted violently*, the Hebrew says «they have laid snares for me». With their lies and their deceit they seek to trap me, to ensnare me, so that they can hold me down, prevent me from standing up, from repenting.

14 *But like a deaf man I do not hear,  
and like a mute I do not open my mouth.*

15 *And I became like a man who does not hear,  
and has no rebuke in his mouth.*

«But I paid no attention to their plots. Like a deaf man I ignored their hateful words. Like a man incapable of speech I made no response to them. I said not a word. I did not seek to counter their charges or argue for my innocence. I left it for God to judge them».<sup>18</sup>

17. See Elder Aimilianos, *On Abba Isaiah*: «From the moment that you start having difficulties with others... you immediately lose your composure and become completely upset. Your body can become ill, weak, and succumb to various sicknesses. Your head hurts or your stomach aches; your back goes out on you, your feet get tired, and your heart feels funny. All the members of your body feel like they're in revolt. And all this happens because you couldn't keep peace with those around you. For David, sin created a host of enemies; even the members of his own household rose up against him (cf. Pss 37:12; 40:10)» (413-414).

18. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Ecclesiastes* 7.8: «*There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak* (Ecc 3:7), as David says, *I became like a man who has no rebuke in his mouth* (Ps 38:15), for the one who does not return evil for evil becomes, in a sense, mute» (GNO 5:410). St. Basil, Letter 223, cites Psalm

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Recall the story of Shimei, who heaped curses on David, and yet David refused to respond (2 Sam 16:5-13).<sup>19</sup> Such nobility! Such magnanimity!

First, we see that the psalmist remains silent. To be sure, it is no small thing to be patient, to act as if nothing were happening, when others are slandering you, when they're digging a pit in which to throw you. If God wants me to descend into their pit, so be it. They seek my death, but I shall live in God. Second, we see that the psalmist has placed all his trust in God. Third, that he has self-knowledge. He knows that he has fallen, that he has sinned against God. «God, I deserve this from them, for I have sinned against You, and so I leave all of this to Your judgment; I allow it to unfold according to Your love. You can do whatever You wish. I however *will not open my mouth*».<sup>20</sup>

38:15 to describe the three-year period in which he did not respond to the slanders of Eustathios of Sebasteia (LCL 3:288). In *The Life of St. Antony*, the father of monasticism cites Psalm 38:14-15 on two occasions as a Scriptural warrant for ignoring the taunts of the demons (ACW 10:43; 53). In a letter, said to have been written by St. Athanasios, the same verse is cited as a warrant for ignoring the insulting remarks made by one's fellow monks (PG 28:869); the same advice is offered in *The Life of St. Synkletiki*, also said to have been written by St. Athanasios (PG 28:1528). The use of Psalm 38:14-15 in such contexts is ancient, and was cited by Origen in the course of giving advice to those facing persecution and martyrdom under the Romans (*Exhortation to Martyrdom*, trans. R. Greer, 47). Of course, the archetype for this behavior is Christ Himself, «Who was oppressed, and afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth» (Is 53:7; cf. 1 Pet 2:23).

19. Theodoret of Kyrrhos, in his comments on Psalm 38:14-15, likewise places these verses in the context of 2 Samuel 16:5-13 (PG 80:1141).

20. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Genesis* 29.3: «I became like a man who does not hear, and like a man who has no retort in his mouth (Ps 38:15). Do you see

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16 *For in You, O Lord, I have hoped.*

*You will hear me, O Lord my God.*

The Hebrew says «You will answer them, O Lord», which fits the context better, as David has just told us that he will *not open his mouth*. He hopes in God, not in arguments and rebuttals. «It is against You that I have sinned, and thus it is with You alone that I must settle my accounts. I have no business with those others. It is for You to deal with them, since in attacking me they also seek to attack You».

17 *For I said, «Do not let my enemies rejoice,*

*when my foot slips, or speak boastful things against me».*

«You will answer them, O Lord». Why? Now he explains: «*So that my enemies may not rejoice when my foot slips*. Do not let these men succeed in their plans. For if I am destroyed, if I die, if I am defeated, if I remain in my sin, they will rejoice over me, they will celebrate and broadcast their victory far and wide, boasting of my defeat. Yet my defeat will also be Yours, my God. So strike them down. Grant the victory to me, so that *You* might be the victor, for it is not me whom they shall conquer, but You».<sup>21</sup>

the extraordinary degree of his wisdom, how he survived difficult times? While his opponents were concocting schemes, he blocked his ears so as not to hear; while they at no time ceased to utter gossip and lies, he checked their folly with silence. Why did he cast himself in this role, giving the impression of being a deaf mute with neither ears nor tongue, especially as they were plotting these stratagems? Listen to the explanation for such wisdom: *Because in You, O Lord, I have placed my hope* (Ps 38:16). Because I depended on my hope in You, he is saying, it was of no interest to me what was done by them; Your grace is sufficient to undermine all that, to render all the plots and schemes futile» (FOTC 82:200).

21. See above, Psalm 88:11-14 (chap. 4).

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18 *For I am ripe for scourging,  
and my pain is before me always.*

In the preceding verse, he was saying «they've got nothing against me, but rather against You, O God». Here he's saying «I've got nothing to do with them, but rather with You, O God». And so «*I am ripe for scourging*. I'm ready for You to strike me». When he said earlier *chastise me not in Your wrath*, he didn't mean «don't punish me at all», but «don't act in anger, rather strike me to the degree that is necessary for my correction, so that the crooked may be set straight».

The Hebrew says «I am ripe for stumbling», as if he were saying, «I'm ready to fall, my God; if You don't act soon, I will be defeated, I will go down into the pit, with no hope of resurrection. I am on the edge of the abyss, at the door of Hades. Save me before I fall».

19 *For I shall acknowledge my transgression,  
and take heed concerning my sin.*

The word «for» denotes a certainty. It has the sense of fulfillment, verification. «Certainly, truly, I will confess my transgression before You and the whole world. I have no desire to conceal it. But first *restore unto me the joy of salvation, and I will teach sinners Your ways, and the impious will return to You* (Ps 51:14-15). Accept my repentance. Forgive me and show me Your love. Show Yourself to be the victor. Remove the threat, the presumption to victory, of the false gods, and then *I shall acknowledge my crime*, for it is then that You will be glorified; it is then that Your love will be more greatly valued, and Your glory more greatly esteemed. Then no one will doubt that You forgive sinners and save them. “Look”, they will say, “how God has used that sinner as His instrument. Truly He is a God of love, a God Who can be trusted (cf. 1 Jn 4:8; 2 Thess 3:3). What God

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promises to do, He does”». Thus the phrase *I shall acknowledge my transgression* expresses something essential, for it means that «I shall announce, I shall confess my crime, my sin, so that the world will learn of Your greatness and Your love».<sup>22</sup>

*And take heed concerning my sin.* To «take heed» means that I will do whatever is necessary to correct, to set aright, what is wrong; it means I will do whatever God tells me to do. Above all, to «take heed» means that something inside me is troubling me, eating away at me. This picks up on the earlier themes of a deep disturbance, an overwhelming dis-ease within his being.

20 *But my enemies flourish and are stronger than I,  
and those who hate me without cause grow in number.*

«I have sinned and am in danger of being destroyed, but my enemies are thriving and in control».<sup>23</sup> Weak people will always be found who will side with the strong, for in their weakness they are drawn to power, being fatally enamored of it. And so, when the rebellion broke out against David, members of his own family and court sided with his opponents (2 Sam 15:12-13). «The number of my enemies increases; I am losing ground».

21 *Those who pay me back evil for good have slandered me  
for pursuing good.*

22. See *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*: «A brother questioned Abba Poemen saying, “What ought I to do?” He said, It is written, *I will acknowledge my iniquity, and take heed concerning my sin* (Ps 38:18)» (trans. B. Ward, 158).

23. Instead of *my enemies flourish*, the Hebrew says «my enemies of life», which some interpret as «mortal enemies». A Psalms scroll discovered at Qumran says «my undeserved enemies».

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«Those who pursue me, who seek to harm me, have continually spread lies about me». Why? «Because I pursued the good; because I sought justice. They seek to destroy me because in my kingdom I sought to enforce the law of God». It's as if he's saying to God: «Do You know why they're doing all this? Do You know why I'm in danger right now? It's because I love You and sought to enforce Your laws».

*22 Do not forsake me, O Lord my God,  
do not stay far from me.*

*23 Hasten to rescue me, O Lord of my salvation.*

«I no longer feel Your presence. Do not leave me here all alone, O Lord. Even though I closed You out of my life, do not abandon me, do not forsake me. Even though I cast You out of my life when I sinned, do not remain far off. Though the door of my soul has closed, open it up and come in, so that I might embrace You once again, and place You within my heart. Come. *Hasten*. Run to me. Listen to the voice of my prayer, of my soul. Run, O Lord, *rescue me*, grant me salvation before it is too late». With this final exclamation, the psalm ends.

As you can see, Psalm 38 is a psalm of repentance. It is not yet a psalm of thanksgiving, since that takes place after the forgiveness of sins. But even though the psalm begins with a sinner in agony pleading *Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, or chastise me in Your wrath*, it ends on a note of enthusiasm, of desire, in the hope of sweet salvation.

The psalmist begins with his pain, from the wound of his soul, so that he might end by saying *hasten to rescue me, O Lord of my salvation*. The exposure of a wound is the first step in its cure. Such a gesture is the cry of someone who knows that God has



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already heard him, and will hear him again. «You *will* hear me, O God, for You are the One Who *heard* me and *saved* me».

David's heart is open to God, and thus he is not focused on himself. Someone who doesn't understand this psalm might read it and shed tears for himself, for his problems, for his frustrated desires, his difficulties, his miseries. But that's what happens when you concentrate too much on your self. David, however, is a spiritual man, and self-pity is not the same thing as spirituality.

The soul, in its agonizing search for God, passes through many stages, looking for God in places of darkness and light, places in which God is hidden and revealed. These stages are evident in Psalm 38, which is the story of every soul that knows itself to be God's creation, something that God has fashioned with His own hands, *for we are indeed His offspring* (Acts 17:28). Psalm 38 presents the soul's struggle as a drama. But the real drama, the real tragedy, is to live in ignorance concerning the state of our soul; to fail to attain self-knowledge, which alone can make us say with Saint Paul, *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* (Rom 7:24). Apart from this, there is no greater tragedy.

*Wretched man that I am*, says Paul, yet right after this he gives glory to God, Who has delivered him from sin and death. In order to move in the direction of your deliverance, you have to have a sense of your own tragedy. To find the cure, you have to understand the sickness in your soul, and so turn to God, Who is life, and health, and holiness. This is not the sort of tragedy in which a *deus ex machina* will be of any use.<sup>24</sup> You need the one, true God, Who is the Lord of your salvation.

24. This Latin phrase, derived from the ancient Greek theater, literally means «god from the machinery», and denotes the convention of lowering or swinging gods into view on a crane, as an artificial way of resolving, in the nick of time, a contrived or absurd plot.

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When the soul attempts to repent, when it begins to desire and feel repentance, it will immediately be struck as if by shock waves. It will feel as if it were about to fall, to be lost, obliterated. As if a great hurricane were sweeping through the soul, everything will be uprooted, moved about, and rearranged according to a new pattern. This is one of the most difficult things you will ever experience. At one point you may feel pain, not only in your soul but in your body as well. The whole self will come under a kind of pressure. And what is this pressure? It is my participation in the pain of God. It is my experience of God's thirst for me. It is the pain of God's running, His loss of breath, as He hastens to rescue me before I collapse and fall into the pit.

The pain that I feel, this tearing into pieces of my being, is the response of my soul to the activity of God, to his efforts to save me. Yet this response, this process, is liable to break down because the soul is weak. If things in the environment work against it, if the people around it create problems (usually as the result of our own egotism), then the experience of pain we're talking about subsides and gives way to another feeling, like the swinging of a pendulum. First we say «yes» to God, but then we say «no». We draw near to God, and then we abandon Him. We may give something to God, but then, after a while, we take it all back. *Behold the servant of the Lord* (cf. Lk 1:38) we like to say, but then our ego reasserts itself, and we return to serving our self.

Throughout our life, we go through many changes, experience many ups and downs. Today we are *children of the light* (cf. Jn 12:36), but tomorrow we are filled with doubts and wonder: «Who is God? Where is God? God has forgotten me». This happens because the ego has placed itself in opposition to God, has made a god of itself, and it is impossible for the two to coexist. The presence of one requires the absence of the other. It's as if two

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mighty gods, the God of my salvation and the god I have made out of my self, have come into conflict. If the ego wins, I will experience psychological isolation, which will include isolation from those around me, along with feelings of bitterness and sorrow. These feelings are the proof that the ego has rejected the God of salvation. The «ego» – taken to include body, soul, and spirit – has sent God into exile. Before this happens I am locked in a struggle with God, and woe to me if I should win.

This marks a critical juncture in my life, for it is the moment when I will have to utter a definitive «yes» or «no» to God. This is the moment when all the conflicts and cross-pressures in the soul, when all the contradictions in my life, rise to their most critical levels. If I say «yes», choosing to reaffirm my ego, I will begin to sink and be lost. If I say «no», it will be as if I returned to life, as if I were resurrected, redeemed. In essence, the ego is a king who is fated to suffer regicide; who is condemned to die and be buried in the ground. Yet my real death consists in the *survival* of my ego. And this will lead to something even worse, for my life will be one of endless anxiety and despair. I will suffer eternally in the hell of my inner division, for I will forever call upon God and forever reject Him. I will find myself in a place where I shall no longer be able to repent.

If, however, I am victorious; If I decide to put my ego to death, then the *king of Glory* will rise from the dead (Ps 23:7), the *Lord of my salvation* (Ps 87:1; Is 38:20), *for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it* (Mt 16:24). The darkness of my isolation will be dispersed by the light of God, and He Himself will be my companion; He will grant me genuine spiritual life, which is something greater than my life, *for it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). I shall discover that Christ lives in me. His experiences shall become mine. This is the goal of my struggling; this is why I wrestle with God.

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And it is not just my struggle, but the struggle of every soul, and of the Church as a whole.

This psalm was not sung by a soloist, but by the entire congregation in a single voice; it is the cry of the whole Church. And whereas the Church herself is holy, her members, her children, fall every day into sin. And so every day the Church mediates between heaven and earth, by means of prayers offered at the altar, and by the prayers of consecrated individuals who like pillars support and uphold the universe. The Church experiences and prays for its fallen members; it participates in all their struggles against the powers of darkness. And it will do so until this struggle comes to an end, when the Church will no longer live *like the woman who fled into the wilderness* (Rev 12:6), but will be *the queen, standing at the right hand of God, arrayed in gold-fringed garments* (cf. Ps 44:10-11).

Finally, this psalm is also the cry of God Himself, the crying out of the Word of God, Who descended from heaven and became man for our salvation. Consequently, this psalm has a messianic dimension; it is a prophecy concerning the life and work of Christ. As we said a moment ago, the phrase «concerning the Sabbath» is a reference to the «new Sabbath», the eternal day of rest that the Lord has prepared for us. Rest, however, presupposes a period of hard work. And so Christ was slandered, scourged, and mocked; the arrows of God were fastened deeply within Him. Evil men plotted against Him, hating him without case. He was abandoned by His friends and neighbors, and in the end there remained with him only a handful of women who looked on him from afar. In some versions of Psalm 38, instead of the words *Those who pay me back evil for good*, which appear at verse 21, it says: *They cast me out, the beloved, as a corpse to be despised*.<sup>25</sup> This is the voice of the

25. This verse is an addition to Psalm 38:21, and is found in many early

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suffering Christ, the Beloved of elect souls, of the holy angels, of God the Father, Who was cast out, sentenced to death, and abandoned as a loathsome corpse.

«My victory is Your victory», David says to the Lord, «and my defeat, which is my sin, is likewise a loss for Your glory, for it interrupts the advance of Your glory in the hearts of men». It follows, then, that when we don't repent, when we have no awareness of our sin, when we are without tears, when we are content to lie in the muck of our sins, we implicate God Himself in our fall. Have we sinned? Do we remain in our sin? If so, then He cries out: «They cast me out, the beloved, as a corpse to be despised».

When I reject the way of repentance, I reject God. When I choose to remain in sin, I expel God from my heart. But as soon as I turn from my sin, God enters my heart. And when He does, I discover my place in the Church, which is His body and His bride.

Greek manuscripts. It does not appear to be a scribal insertion, but rather a line from some other text. It is otherwise unattested, but has parallels with Isaiah 14:19: «But you are cast out, away from your sepulcher, like a loathed and untimely birth, clothed with the slain, those pierced by the sword, who go down to the pit, like a dead body trodden under foot».



## Psalm 19 (LXX 18)

For the end. A psalm of David.

- 2 *The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands.*
- 3 *Day unto day pours forth speech,  
and night unto night proclaims knowledge.*
- 4 *There are no tongues or words in which their voices are not heard;*
- 5 *Their sound has gone forth into all the earth  
and their words unto the ends of the earth.*
- 6 *In the sun He has pitched His tent,  
and like a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber,  
He will rejoice like a giant in running his course.*
- 7 *From the edge of heaven is His going forth,  
and His goal is the edge of heaven,  
and there is no man that can hide from His heat.*
- 8 *The law of the Lord is blameless, converting souls;  
the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, bringing wisdom  
to infants.*
- 9 *The statutes of the Lord are upright, gladdening the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is far-shining, enlightening the eyes.*
- 10 *The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring unto ages of ages;  
the judgments of the Lord are true, altogether justified,*
- 11 *More to be desired than gold and much precious stone,  
and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.*
- 12 *For Your servant keeps them,  
and in keeping them there is much reward.*
- 13 *As for transgressions, who will understand them?  
Cleanse me from my secret sins,*

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- 14 *And spare me, Your servant, from the foreigners,  
If they do not rule over me, I shall be blameless,  
and cleansed from a great sin.*
- 15 *And the sayings of my mouth will be pleasing,  
and the meditation of my heart will be before You always,  
O Lord, my helper and redeemer.*

\*

\* \*

Today we shall consider Psalm 19, which is one of the better-known psalms, often described as a «psalm of thanksgiving». In our reflections on Psalm 38, we saw that in order for the kingdom of heaven to become a living reality in our heart, for it to become something truly *within us* (cf. Lk 17:21), we need to experience God's holiness and His glory. Why? Because when we experience God's holiness we become conscious of our own sinfulness, and this opens the door for contact with God. The moment we begin to perceive and comprehend something of God's glory, we start to see things differently. Our sense of the possibilities changes, and from the smallness of our fallen condition – from our sinfulness and our nothingness – we acquire an open, expansive vision of our growth in likeness to God.

The experience of God's holiness enables us to see just how far we've fallen. At the same time, God's glory reveals to us the goal of our ascent; it shows us, not what we are, but what we shall become. The glory of God opens up to us the mystery of the Holy Trinity, which is the source and foundation of our spiritual life, of our growth in likeness to God. The Trinitarian God is the One God, the God of glory. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is the supreme teaching of the Church, the center and source of Her glory.



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What God did in the Old Testament by means of various foreshadowings, He did much more plainly and openly in the New Testament, for it was in the latter that He revealed Himself as a unity of Three Persons in One Nature. At the Transfiguration of the Lord<sup>1</sup> (which we celebrated the day before yesterday), the light that flashed forth from the body of the Savior was merely a small glimmer of His glory, but it was nonetheless a revelation of the divine Triunity. This is why in the icon of the feast the Transfigured Christ is depicted within a luminous triangle, with its point turned upward, for this is a symbol of the glory of the Trinity.

It is necessary, then, for us to understand as much as we can the concept of God's glory. But how does this happen, how do we arrive at such an understanding? It happens either when we are transported to a realm beyond the heavens, or when we transform ourselves into a hammer or an axe. When you want to cut down a tree, you strike it once, twice, a thousand times. This is how we should strike at our hardened hearts, at the frozen surface of our souls. If we do this, then, with God's help, we will come to understand something of God's glory. How do I strike at my heart, so that I might crack it open? One way is by reading and reflecting on the psalms.

The use of the word «psalm» in the title indicates that the text before us expresses religious feelings, spiritual experiences. To perceive and to feel God is a spiritual experience. The title also tells us that this is a «psalm of David», a man whose life was filled with many troubles, yet in the midst of all his turmoil, throughout all his many changes, he never ceased to seek after God. That's very important. Why? Because having continuously sought after God

1. Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; and Luke 9:28-36.

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in both his sorrows and his joys, David was granted continual revelations of God's grace.

The first part of the title, «for the end», tells us something about the psalm's importance, since it had to be performed under the direction of the chief musician. We know that psalms of this type deal with the revelation of God. They describe a theophany, and we are informed of this from the beginning, by the elements of the title, so that we might prepare ourselves to encounter God within the words of the psalm.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 *The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands.*  
3 *Day unto day pours forth speech,  
and night unto night proclaims knowledge.*  
4 *There are no tongues or words in which their voices are not heard;*  
5 *Their sound has gone forth into all the earth  
and their words unto the ends of the earth.*

*The heavens declare the glory of God.* These words strike us as an affirmation of the revelation of God through nature, which is sometimes called «natural theology». What theologians mean by this phrase is knowledge of God mediated through the natural, created order. Many interpreters have taken these verses to be an important statement concerning the revelation of God through creation; indeed they see it as a kind of proof-text for the notion that nature is an eloquent witness to the existence of God.<sup>3</sup>

2. The phrase «for the end» is also discussed above, in the introductions to chaps. 4, 5 and 7.

3. Psalm 19:2, often in conjunction with Psalm 8 and Romans 1:19-20, is one of the key Scriptural passages cited by the Church Fathers when discussing

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However, in these verses there is no attempt to demonstrate or prove the existence of God based on the evidence of creation. The psalmist is not out to «prove» anything. Instead, he desires only to express his experiences; to express the content of his inner being. In saying *the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands*, the psalmist is not trying to suggest the manner in which God is revealed through creation, but to describe the way he himself *feels* about that creation, the way he *experiences* it. His purpose is to express his own relation to the natural world, along with the relation between the God Whom he experiences within himself, and the God Who is visible in creation (cf. Acts 14:15-17; Rom 1:20).

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands.* Here we may perhaps think of ancient beliefs concerning the «music of the spheres», the idea that the rotation of the earth and the other planets, within a series of concentric spheres, not only generated a kind of music, but was also an image of God Himself.<sup>4</sup> For the ancients, these ideas

the revelation of God through creation. Although in what follows the elder will appear to reject such an interpretation, his aim is in fact to critique misunderstandings of it, and so, at a later stage in his commentary, he returns to a more positive assessment of creation as a mode of divine revelation.

4. Speculations about cosmic «harmony» are associated with the early Pythagoreans, and were given classical form in Plato's *Republic* 6.616-617, 7.530d; cf. id., *Timaeus* 34b-36d, 90d. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his *On the Life of Moses* 2.169, suggests that the «music» of the heavens is instrumental in the transition from physical to spiritual reality: «The heavenly trumpet which Moses heard on Sinai is a teacher for the one who is ascending to the *tabernacle not made with hands* (Heb 9:11). For the wonderful harmony of the heavens proclaims the wisdom which shines forth in creation and sets forth the glory of God through the things which are seen, in keeping with the words, *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2)» (trans. A. Malherbe &

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were an attempt to make sense of certain phenomena, things that they experienced but were not able to explain or understand. To be sure, the mysteries of the night sky and of the super-celestial realms have always been tremendously alluring to the human soul. However, it seems safe to say that such ideas, popular among Greek philosophers, were not likely to have been foremost in the mind of the psalmist.

*The heavens declare the glory of God* by means of their harmonious order, by their seemingly infinite expansion, and by their remarkable diversity of objects and phenomena. Notice that the psalmist does not say «heaven» but «heavens», in order to teach us that above us there are many heavens, many firmaments, many worlds, and each of these is one in a series of revelations of God and His infinite power. Just as the blue sky declares the glory of God by means of its dazzling brightness, the mysteries beyond the sky are expressed with equal eloquence by the impenetrable darkness of night.

But this is not the most important thing, and it is not what the psalmist is drawing our attention to. For even though the heavens may appear to be a kind of shining garment worn by God, or a gleaming throne arching over the footstool of the earth; even though they seem to reveal God with breathtaking eloquence, the truth is that they make no sound whatsoever. They are silent. The heavens reveal the glory of God not through speech, not through

T. Ferguson, 96); see also St. John Chrysostom, *Sermon on Isaiah 45:7*: «If it's melodies you long for, abandon the strains of the lyre and, with a well-tuned mind, attend to the music of the heavens. Behold a host of sounds and lyric odes; a single soaring harmony of praise to the divine master craftsman... With your mind, pluck the strings of the heavens, and you will hear a mighty sound generating the praises of God, just as the prophet said, for *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2)» (PG 56:143).

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the discursive transmission of data, but by silence, for it is not speech but silence that is the most eloquent, the most persuasive, and the most authentic form of communication.<sup>5</sup>

*The firmament declares the work of His hands.* The «firmament» is the expanse of sky above us (cf. Gen 1:6), understood to be a

5. Compare St. Basil of Casesarea, *On Proverbs*: «*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands* (Ps 19:2), but they do so silently, for creation, without uttering a sound, cries out loudly concerning its creator, in words of wisdom designed to lead us to the One Who alone is wise» (PG 31:392); cf. id., *Hexaemeron* 3.9 (FOTC 46:52); St. John Chrysostom, *To the people of Antioch*: «In so far as God has glorified us through creation, let us glorify Him through our manner of life. *The heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2) merely by their appearance, and so we too should give glory to God, not only by means of our words, but by our silence, that is, by the example of our life» (PG 49:109); id., *On the Martyr Julianus*: «The martyr calls us to imitate his example, not by his words but by his deeds, for *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2), not by means of speech, but by the brilliance of their appearance they direct the viewer to marvel at the creator. So too does the martyr *declare the glory of God*, being himself another *heaven*, though far more brilliant and shining than the one we see above us» (PG 50:669); id., *On Psalm 145*: «Even though they have no tongue, mouth, or lips, *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2), for their great beauty strikes those who see them and moves them to marvel at the creator» (PG 55:522); St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Psalm 19:2*: «David hears the *heavens declaring the glory of God* (Ps 19:2), and the *firmament proclaiming the work of His hands* (Ps 19:2), which is a wondrous thing, since the creator did not endow them with a soul, and so with the ears of his intellect David grasps their inner principles of theology, providence, and judgment» (PG 91:1121); and St. John of Damascus, «On the Heavens», in his *On the Orthodox Faith* 2.6 (20): «Let no one maintain that the heavens are animate, for they are inanimate and without feeling. When it says that *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:2), they do this not by speaking in a voice audible to the ears, but by manifesting to us through their own greatness the power of the creator» (FOTC 37: 214).

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rounded covering stretching over the earth, as if we were looking up at the inside of a vast blue dome. Moses called the sky a «firmament» because he conceived of it as being something solid and «firm», despite the fact that it was built on a foundation of water (cf. Gen 1:6-7).<sup>6</sup> This is of course a rather striking idea, for how could something so vast as the dome of the heavens stand on the surface of flowing liquid? Shaped like a dome, the «firmament» naturally makes us think of something built out of stone, but it's better instead to think of it as a great tent, a canopy unfurled over the earth, mysteriously fixed to the surface of the waters.

*The work of His hands.* Here the choice of the word «work» (ποίησις) is significant. It does not refer to the result or product of work (i.e., ποίημα), but to a work in progress, indeed to the very activity of working, making, and creating. Instead of focusing on creation as an object, the psalmist draws our attention to the activity of the creator. All things are silent, hushed, holding their breath, as it were, so that we might see the living God; so that we might behold His activity in creation, as He stretches out the beauteous canopy of the heavens.

The sky above and the heavens beyond enable us to touch God. They are the medium through which we can behold God

6. Compare Origen, *On Genesis* 1.2: «The “firmament” is the corporeal heaven, for every corporeal object is, without doubt, firm and solid» (FOTC 71:49); Eusebios of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel* 11.6: «Moses rightly calls heaven a “firmament”, since after the creation of angelic nature it is the world's first “firm” and tangible body» (PG 21:857C); and St. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron* 3.4: «It is customary in Scripture to assign the name “firmament” to things that excel in strength, as when it says, *the Lord is my firmament and my refuge* (Ps 18:3), and so we believe that this word has been assigned for a certain firm nature which is capable of supporting the fluid and unstable water» (FOTC 46:42-43).

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working, both in creation and in history, down to the present day and hour, provided of course that we look at things with the eyes of the spirit. Perhaps now we can understand the principle of revelation through silence. The heavens do not speak about God. Instead, through their silence, through the sheer force of their perfection and stability, they are a transparent witness to the presence of their creator.

*Day unto day pours forth speech, and night unto night proclaims knowledge.*<sup>7</sup> Here we have a striking personification of the day and the night, as if they were sentient beings speaking to each other.<sup>8</sup> In Scripture, the day ordinarily follows the night, *for there was evening and there was morning, one day* (Gen 1:5). We might there-

7. This verse has called forth a variety of interpretations, of which we give the following example from a sermon attributed to St. John Chrysostom: «*Day unto day pours forth speech* (Ps 19:3). God the Father is a “Day”, just as the Son is, and if you wish to see how One *day pours forth speech* to the Other, go to the Jordan River, where the Day in heaven spoke to the Day on earth. For the Father said *this is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased* (Mt 3:17). And do not think that the prophet overlooked the Holy Spirit, for the Day *poured forth speech* (οἶμα) to the Day, and this “speech” was the Holy Spirit, Who hovered in the air between them, in the form of a dove. And we are taught that the Spirit is called “speech” by Paul, who says *take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word* (οἶμα) *of God* (Eph 6:17). And day spoke to night in Christ, in so far as he is both God and man, for compared to the light of divinity, humanity is “darkness”, which is why it says, *He made darkness His hiding place* (Ps 18:11)» (ed. F. Nau, 8). See also Evagrius, *On Psalm 19*: «The day of the Resurrection *pours forth speech* to the *day* of the Cross, declaring that the One Who was crucified has risen from the dead as God» (ΒΕΠΙΕΣ 80:36).

8. In illuminated Byzantine Psalters, the female figure of «Night» is often personified as dark-skinned and clothed in a veil of stars fluttering over her head. She is normally paired not with Day, but with Dawn, depicted as a child holding a torch.

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fore have expected the psalmist to say that «the *one day* pours forth speech to the night, and the night subsequently speaks to the following day». In that case we would have had the transmission of a single revelation, given on the first day, passed down through time, and continuing through the present. That would be one way of seeing it. But one could also see the «heavens» – which are the dwelling places of night and day – not as an expanse of space, but as something that transcends space, in the sense of being beyond the ordinary space we occupy, and thus beyond time, participating in infinity. On these terms, we could say that the revelation of God is imparted to us from a realm or dimension beyond time.

The psalmist presents us with a world in which the human person has the capacity to understand the silent witness of the heavens. At the same time, he animates and personifies the elements of creation, endowing them with various qualities and abilities. The cycle of time, linked to the alternation of darkness and light, is organized into two choirs ceaselessly glorifying God. We would say that they're singing antiphonally. One choir is made up of the Days, the other of the Nights, because like is attracted to like. Yet the emphasis is not so much on their exchange, not so much on the circulation or movement of anything between them, but rather on their mutual union and understanding, their common grasp and vision of the glory of God.

Yet another dimension of this verse worth considering is the meaning of the verb «to proclaim» (*ἐρρέγεται*), which denotes something that wells up from an internal depth; something that bubbles up from a deep source.<sup>9</sup> A true word is something that is born deep within us; from a hidden place of silence it emerges into

9. The Hebrew says «day to day *breathes* utterance», although the etymological sense of the verb *yabi'a* is to «well forth».



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the light. One day speaks to the next day, calling out to it from the depths, and all together they form a single choir, a single source, like the sonorous confluence of streams and rivers (cf. Ps 29:3). Each day brings forth something of its own, something unique to itself, something drawn from its own experience, from its inner being.<sup>10</sup> Water wells up from a spring; life emerges from the womb; and words blossom forth from the hidden root of being. But what exactly is this *speech* that is *poured forth*, this *word* that is being *proclaimed*? He doesn't say. It is as if one day whispers a secret to the next, delivering itself of the inexpressible mystery it heard in the heavens. One day is linked to the next by communication and the continuity of experience, and this experience is of God, for the «day» is the symbolic unit of time encompassing God's activity.

The «night», on the other hand, contains its own mysteries; it has its own secrets to disclose. Unlike the day, the night is not the «time» of God's activity, but the mysterious interval in which He is revealed. It is during the night that God reveals Himself to us, when He comes and speaks to the depths of the soul.<sup>11</sup> *Be at rest*, He says, *and know*

10. See Elder Aimilianos, *On St. Hesychios*: «Concentrating our attention within ourselves by saying the Jesus Prayer, we find all things by means of spiritual vision. Tranquility, sweetness, beauty, and the radiance of the Lord's face become our daily experience. And not just this, but *day unto day pours forth speech* (Ps 19:3) as the experience of each day is added to those of previous days, and we become people full of understanding, love, and divine energy» (158-159).

11. See St. Isaac the Syrian, *Homily 75*: «All the revelations that were given to the saints concerning diverse matters, whether they served to make them prudent or were for the common instruction of men, came to them for the most part during the night and at the time of prayer. Therefore our Fathers received this lofty teaching concerning prayer as if it were from the Savior Himself» (*Homilies*, 371).

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*that I am God* (Ps 46:11).<sup>12</sup> The time of «rest» is the night, and each night has its own distinct experience of God, its own particular kind of communion with Him, which it conveys to the next night, and so on in succession. God is the same and yet He appears differently depending on the nature of the reflecting object or medium. Thus during the day we have the active God, rushing about and busy with all sorts of things, but at night we have God revealed in silence. Both offer praise to God in a way unique to each: the practical man through his projects and activities, and the contemplative man through his prayers and contemplations. But all glorify God.

We can say, then, that what is communicated is the knowledge of God, and that this is proclaimed jointly by the succession of days and nights. The silent depths of night know God, and this knowledge is conveyed to the day, which likewise has knowledge of God. And this knowledge passes from night to day, and from day to night, like a ceaseless melody flowing between two choirs, each singing silently to the other, in a hidden, mystical manner. Yet despite the silence, despite the mysterious nature of their communication, *there are no tongues or words in which their voices are not heard*. Not a word is lost. Everything they say is heard by all, for their perfect silence is a thunderous voice.

The marvelous light of the day gives witness to God. The silence of the night reveals God. And both together, along with the mystical *tongues* resounding throughout creation, constitute a single choir,

12. See St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Psalm 46:11*: «There are six kinds of rest, which, if we attain to them, enable us to know God. The first is “rest” from the activity of sin; the second is “rest” from rich, heavy foods; third comes “rest” from associating with those who live carelessly; fourth, “rest” from whatever does not contribute to life in God; fifth, “rest” from the many distractions of the intellect; and finally, to “rest” entirely from acting on one’s own will» (CCSG 10:153-154).

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as if a single voice were speaking about God. This is why the first part of Psalm 19 is considered to be such a key text for the notion of divine revelation through creation. However there is a subtle difference. As we said a moment ago, the message of the psalm is not about some sort of natural, materialistic proof for the existence of God. It is something spiritual. The psalmist sees God as coming forth and expanding; he sees the descent of God as a kind of extension, a copious diffusion, so that all things are filled with a deep voicefulness. And this is something that emerges silently from the depths. A person can remain silent and yet cry out to God from the depths of his being, so that God responds and says *why do you cry to me?* (Ex 14:15). In the same way, the voicefulness of creation rises up silently from the depths, resounding in the tympanum of the heavens, reverberating in a sustained crescendo across the days and the nights, and so on until the end of time.

*Their sound has gone forth into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the earth.*<sup>13</sup> The sound of heaven echoes throughout the earth, reverberating from one day to the next. Here the

13. This verse is associated with the preaching of the apostles, and in the Orthodox Church is chanted as a communion hymn on Thursday (i.e., the day of the week dedicated to memory of the apostles), as well as on the feast day of an apostle. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 19*: «This psalm, as if speaking on behalf of the apostles, presents their teaching in elementary form, for they taught the pagans that the sky and the sun were not gods, and that the elements of creation sing hymns of praise to the one, true God» (PG 27:124); and Origen, *On Genesis* 1.13: «Those who are perfect, who have been made heavenly or have become like heaven *declare the glory of God* (Ps 19:1). For this reason also the apostles, who were of heaven, were sent to *declare the glory of God* and received the name of *Boanerges*, which means “sons of thunder” (Mk 3:17), that by the power of thunder we might believe them truly to be of heaven» (FOTC 71:64-65; cf. 232).

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word for «earth» means the «inhabited earth», that is, the human world of souls capable of hearing of the «sound» of God. «Sounds» and «words» are different things. Their «sound» is a reference to something lacking in words, like a tone or vibration, or a song with no lyrics, and thus without meaning. «Words», on the other hand, contain and communicate specific, particular meanings. God descends and resounds throughout creation, but not everyone understands the meaning and significance of this event.

*6 In the sun He has pitched His tent,  
and like a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber,  
He will rejoice like a giant in running his course.*

In order to convey some sense of the glory of God, the psalmist evokes the image of the sun, which is the brightest and most magnificent object we see in the sky. His point is that what the human eye is incapable of looking at without being blinded, is in fact a mere tent, a canopy for God.<sup>14</sup>

It is well known that in Greek mythology, and in many other mythological and religious traditions, the sun god is said to dwell in a palace. Helios, for example, and his son, Phaethon, had a palace in the East.<sup>15</sup> The psalm, however, does not present us with

14. A point argued extensively by St. John Chrysostom, *On Genesis* 6.10-13 (FOTC 74:83-84).

15. Phaethon was the son of Helios and the mortal woman Clymene. Learning who his father was, Phaethon set out for the East to find him, and eventually discovered his palace. Phaethon asked to guide the solar chariot for a day, but was too weak to manage the immortal horses, which bolted and would have set the world on fire had Zeus not killed Phaethon with a thunderbolt. He fell to the earth and his sisters, mourning his loss, turned him into an amber-dropping tree; cf. Euripides, *Hippolytus* 735; and Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.750.

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anything like a luxurious palace, but simply a tent, which was and continues to be a viable type of dwelling in the Middle East. The Jews, moreover, were for the most part nomads, and lived in tents and other kinds of temporary dwellings, a custom reflected in the Feast of Booths (Lev 23:33-43). The history of the Jews has been deeply marked by their flight from Egypt and subsequent wanderings in the desert, during which they spent forty years dwelling in tents. One could say that the history of Israel unfolds beneath a tent. Thus, in identifying the sun as God's tent, it's as if the psalmist is saying: «If you can, take a look at the sun. What your tent is for you, that's what the sun is for God. Just as easy as it is for you to unpack and set up your tent; and just as easy as it is for you to pull it down and fold it up, that's how easily God rules over the sun. Yes, He dwells in the sun, but at the same time He rolls it around like a warm pebble in the palm His hand».

With the image of the sun, the psalmist is making a connection to the brightness of the heavens, with the aim of expressing the majesty and magnificence of God. According to one interpretation of the Hebrew, «the *sun* pitched its tent in heaven». Just like God, this remarkable object, this fiery star that rules the day, and whose absence is the cause of darkness, chose to establish itself in the heavens. Yet this too is another way to praise the heavens, since they are ultimately the place where God dwells and from which He comes forth; from which He extends Himself throughout all creation. On this point, the Hebrew and the Greek versions are not essentially different. There is room for both, for they speak of the same thing in different keys.<sup>16</sup>

16. The Hebrew says «For the sun He placed a tent in them», with the «them» presumably referring to the «heavens». Thus while the Hebrew speaks of God creating a dwelling *for* the sun in the heavens, the Greek has God pitch his

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*And like a bridegroom coming forth from his chamber, He will rejoice like a giant in running his course.* From all of the heavens, from the whole of the celestial firmament, the psalmist singles out the sun, for he knows of no object more brilliant than this to use as a comparison for God. The sun seems to begin its course in the East, like a radiant youth from a bridal chamber, stepping out from under the shade of the wedding canopy. Like a bridegroom the sun appears in all its beauty, dressed in all its finery, full of life and ready to embark upon the new day.

*He will rejoice like a giant running His course.* Why «like a giant»? Because when compared to all the other stars the sun appears to be a giant. But there is another reason. What does the sun do during the night? He battles with the stars, wrestles with the elements of the universe, and in the morning appears as a victor. Having defeated the darkness, he waxes strong and grows like a giant, ruling over the day. He holds sway until evening, when he must repeat his battle all over again.

*7 From the edge of heaven is His going forth,  
and His goal is the edge of heaven,  
and there is no man that can hide from His heat.*

We have all seen the sun rise from one end of the sky and make its way to the other end, traveling from one edge of the horizon to the other. Nothing can stop the course of the sun. And if the sun has such power as it runs across the sky, what must the appear-

tent *in* the sun and by extension creates a much closer connection between God and the sun. The Greek translator, who was most likely an Egyptian Jew, appears in this instance to have understood the Hebrew in a manner consistent with his own cultural context.

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ance of God be like, and His progress through time and space? There is no confusion here between God and the sun, but rather the development of an image suggesting the glory, power, and energy of God.

The word «God» is said to be derived from different roots, one of them meaning «to run», and this is yet another way in which the sun, «running its course» across the sky, serves as an image of God's speed and swiftness. However, the key element in the comparison is the fact that the sun is the source of light, and this is the supreme image that we have for God. Thus the psalmist describes God as a shining sun, coming forth like a radiant bridegroom from his canopy of bliss. The One Who came to us from heaven «like a bridegroom» left His celestial home in order to be with His bride, the Church. He came so that He might embrace Her, so that they may celebrate their nuptials. And so too does He draw near to you, yearning to enter your soul, there to conduct a mystical marriage.

*And there is no man that can hide from His heat.* Why does he say «heat» and not «light»? Because what most affected the ancient Israelites was not the sun's light but its scorching heat, which dries out and dehydrates the body with remarkable speed. Palestine has always suffered from droughts and dry spells, and this is why so many psalms speak of the burning desert, of the painful condition caused by thirst, of thirsty dears panting for water (cf. Ps 42:1), and so on. Brightness could be deflected or blocked out, but escape from the heat was virtually impossible. One could hide from the light, but there was nowhere to run from the heat. And this is how the psalmist dramatizes the fact that God's activity reaches even to the most remote soul, to the last human being, penetrating to the darkest depths of human life. Whether you find yourself in the darkness of a cave, in the depths of night, or in the

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depths of the ocean (cf. Ps 139:7-12), God's heat will find you and warm you up. Then you will understand and acknowledge and accept the fact of this warmth; that what has reached you is God Himself.

The idea that *no man can hide from His heat* stresses the fact that no one can hide from God. You can deny God, but you cannot hide from Him. If you fail to see the glory of God, it's not because God refuses to reveal Himself to you, but because you are unwilling to receive His warmth and light. You fail to see because you refuse to look. But though you close your eyes to God, His light continues to shine on you. His ray continues to touch you. The sound of Him continues to ring in your ears, and He Himself appears before you like a running giant. If you wish, you can hear His voice, feel His heat, and so receive His revelation. If you deny Him, however, you will deny a fundamental part of your own life. No one can hide from God. Why do you act, then, as if you alone will be able to do so?

With this verse, the first part of the psalm comes to an end. In the final analysis, we *can* see the psalm as an expression of natural revelation, in the sense that creation is a witness.<sup>17</sup> You accept the account provided by this witness, because it is given to you naturally. What it has to say is not something imposed on you by some external force or agent, but is directly related to your own inner experience. What we have, in other words, is a personal vision of the natural world, and not some sort of objective proof for the existence of God. The psalmist is not seeking to persuade us

17. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*: «Although God is the creator of the universe, He does not hesitate to reveal Himself by means of His own creations. The sky and the sun are His images, so too the sea and the mountains, and everything that comes between birth and death» (301).



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that God exists. Instead, he reveals to us the depths of his soul, the manner in which he sees God in creation. Nothing is imposed on him, and he seeks to impose nothing on us. All he has, and all we have, is the datum of experience, which we express through images taken from the world around us.

If a created object like the sun is so bright, it seems logical to conclude that the creator must be incomparably brighter. This, however, is a kind of natural theology that depends on the laws of cause and effect. It is something logical, objective, which I am required to accept, until of course a new argument comes along and overturns it. When the theory of cause and effect is dismantled, I lose in the same stroke my natural revelation and my so-called objective proof for the existence of God. But when seen from the point of view of personal experience, it is God who is my light, like the sun. It is not the sun that reveals God, but my soul, which subsequently makes use of the image of the sun in order to express my conception of God.<sup>18</sup> It is something internal, something that emerges from the depths of my experience.

In more general terms, we do not wish altogether to deny the truth of natural theology, for God *is* revealed through creation.

18. This reversal of ordinary logic is also evident in Ephesians 3:15: «I bow before God the Father, from Whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named», on which compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *Against the Arians*: «God is not like we are. God exists and creates, not as men do, but as God. It follows, then, that God begets not like men do, but as God. God does not imitate men, but on the contrary it is men who are called “fathers” on account of the one, true Father of His own Son, *from Whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named* (Eph 3:15)» (PG 26:60); and Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Ephesians*: «Properly speaking, God alone is Father, for He is Father according to His very nature. All other fathers, whether corporeal or spiritual, receive this title in a secondary, derivative manner» (PG 85:529).

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The smallest bird, the wing of a butterfly, the tiniest ant, and every cicada singing in the heat, bear witness to God. Yet the revelation of God in and through the visible creation pales in significance when compared to God's revelation to the human heart.<sup>19</sup> Glimmerings of God in the created order are the easiest things to deny or explain away. Such revelations are rudimentary, a primer for children; they are a condescension of God to the level of visible images and analogies. Here, however, we have a *psalm*, that is, the expression of the spiritual experiences of the psalmist. This is not a proof, and thus it cannot be contradicted or supplanted. All the so-called «proofs» for the existence of God are the constructions of human logic. But the only real proof for God's existence is the experience of God, the vision of God, which is in the end the assimilation of the human person to God. This is why the psalmist says *taste and see* (Ps 34:9), and why Christ Himself says, *come and see* (Jn 1:39). When you see Him for yourself, then you will understand, and you shall require no further proof.

We come now to the second part of the psalm. Many interpret-

19. Compare St Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity* 11: «The path leading us to the discovery of beauty would thus (i.e., through asceticism) come into being for us and we would not squander our power of desire on any of the other things which distract us and which are considered beautiful and, for this reason, worthy of our zeal and praise. We would disregard these as being low and ephemeral, nor would we lazily and idly be limited to them, but, having been cleansed from our obsession with lowly things, our desire would go up to where perception does not reach, so that we would not admire the beauty of the sky, or the rays of light, or any other beautiful appearance, but through the beauty seen in all these, we would be led by a desire for that beauty of which *the heavens tell the glory, and the firmament* of all creation *proclaims the knowledge* (Ps 19:2)» (FOTC 58:39-40).

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ers believe that the first seven verses of Psalm 19, which we have just considered, are all that survives from a psalm that was originally much longer. They further argue that the second half of the psalm, from verse 8 through the end, is all that is left of yet another psalm, the first part of which was lost, and that a later editor brought the two pieces together. It is true that there is a difference between the first and second parts of the psalm, but I don't think it's because they have their sources in two different texts. Psalm 19 is a unified work, as I will explain in what follows.<sup>20</sup>

8 *The law of the Lord is blameless, converting souls;  
the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, bringing wisdom to infants.*

The psalmist began by speaking about the heavens and the sun, but now he speaks of the law. From an initial focus on creation, he now turns to Sacred Scripture. This seemingly abrupt shift has led many interpreters to the conclusion that what we have here are fragments from two different psalms that have been spliced together. The first part, they say, is about the revelation of God in creation, and the second part is about the particular, historical revelation given by God through the law and the prophets. These, they argue, are two different modes of revelation. However, it is more correct to say that the revelation of God to the human heart

20. Many modern interpreters contend that Psalm 19 was spliced together from two unrelated psalms belonging to two different religious and poetical genres. Such a possibility cannot easily be dismissed, since this is a standard technique of Biblical literary composition. However, we can be fairly sure that whoever brought these pieces together saw the two parts as constituting a single whole. The connection may have been the association of the sun in the first part of the psalm (Ps 19:6-7) with the themes of justice and righteousness (cf. Mal 4:2) that appear in the second part.

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is a single, uniform revelation; a mode of communication that makes use of a multiplicity of signs and symbols through which one sees God.<sup>21</sup>

The psalmist experiences God both through creation and through the written law, and having journeyed through the created order, he now arrives at the world of God's law. *The law of the Lord is blameless*. What is the «law» of the Lord? It is, in the first place, the body of observances, rules, and commandments established by God and recorded in the first five books of Moses. However, the concept of «law» also has a wider range of meaning, including the authoritative «instruction» or «teaching» of God, and it seems to me that this is better suited to the larger context of our psalm.<sup>22</sup> This means that the psalmist's primary emphasis

21. According to Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation*, the law and cosmology are closely related, and so Moses' framing of the law «begins with an account of the creation of the world, implying that the world is in harmony with the law, and the law with the world, and the man who observes the law is thereby a loyal citizen of the world, regulating his actions by the purpose and will of nature, in accordance with which the entire world itself also is administered» (LCL 1:6). See also St. Maximos the Confessor, *To Thalassios* 64: «The written law, or rather the fullness of the written law, is the realization of the natural meaning of being, accompanied by a new spiritual motivation for action» (CCSG 22:235); and *ibid.*, 26: «The king of Babylon is a symbol of the natural law, to which the Jews became subject, having fallen away from the spiritual law, and so they asked those in Jerusalem to pray for the life of the king of Babylon and his son, so that their days may be like the days of heaven (cf. Bar 1:11); desiring to live in accordance with the natural law and not the spiritual one, they called the principles of this law "days", and the spiritual law "heaven"» (CCSG 7:183).

22. The Greek translator(s) of the Psalter had a decided preference for terms related to the «law» (νόμος), and thus law-centered human behavior is more prominent and explicit in the Greek than in the Hebrew. The word «law-

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is not on the written law as such, but rather on the Lord Himself, for it is He Who speaks and teaches. And the Lord's teaching is *blameless*, which means that it is perfect, flawless, without any blemish or disfiguring element (cf. Eph 5:27). It is perfect both in the depth of its wisdom and in the width of its application (cf. Eph 3:18), containing all that is necessary to lead human beings to union with God.<sup>23</sup>

That the Lord's teaching *converts souls* means that it has the power to transform life itself, for the soul is the principle of life within us. Thus it was by His words alone that Christ gave sight to the blind, raised paralytics up from their beds (cf. Mt 9:5; Jn 5:8), and commanded a dead man to rise from his tomb (Jn 11:39-44). In this way, the power of «conversion» ascribed to the law of God includes the power of raising fallen man from the dead, restoring him to life, physically and spiritually, for it is the power of God Himself.

At a more basic level, the «law» is essentially a rule of conduct, in the sense of something that conducts us to the knowledge of God and the principles of His creation. By «principles of creation» we do not mean things like the periodic table of elements or the laws of

lessness» (*ἀνομία*), for example, translates eleven different Hebrew words, the word «lawless» (*ἄνομος*) four different Hebrew words, «illegal act» (*παράνομία*) four different Hebrew words, and «unlawful» (*παράνομος*) five. As the elder suggests, the word «law» in such a context represents an entire complex ideas and values, and cannot be reduced to its merely jurisprudential features.

23. Compare St. Mark the Ascetic, *On the Spiritual Law* 33: «When we are compelled by our conscience to accomplish all the commandments of God, then we shall understand that *the law of the Lord is blameless* (Ps 19:8). It is performed through our good actions, but cannot be perfected by men without God's mercy» (*Philokalia* 1:112).

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thermodynamics. To be sure, the human mind is able to discover many of the laws of the physical world, but this is knowledge of surface phenomena. Beyond the reach of such knowledge are deeper truths, hidden principles, which have been revealed to us by God. Thus it is only in virtue of divine revelation that we know the cause, the reason, why God created the world. Only the light of revelation can illuminate the deeper relations among created things, and the relation of creation to the human person, and ultimately to God.<sup>24</sup> Like the rising sun, the law illumines the spiritual structures of creation; it encompasses a theology of nature that can conduct us to the outer courtyards, that is, to the frontiers and boundaries of God. The law of the Lord is perfect and teaches us how to progress and grow in wisdom and knowledge (cf. Lk 2:52).

*The testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, bringing wisdom to infants.* What is the «testimony» of the Lord? It is yet another aspect of the law, of the teaching of the Lord. As we've said, words like law, testimony, statute, commandment, judgments, and so on, are ultimately references to the Lord Himself, Who reveals Himself in different ways through the particular laws and commandments.<sup>25</sup>

The *testimony of the Lord is trustworthy* because the Lord bears witness to nothing other than Himself and the inner principles of

24. See St. Maximos the Confessor, *To Thalassios* 13: «The principles of creation were formed in God before the ages, in a way that is known only to Him. And though they are invisible, they may be seen in and through created things. For all creation, when contemplated in the appropriate spiritual manner, reveals to us the reasons for which it was created, which is why it says that *the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims the work of His hands* (Ps 19:2) (CCSG 7:97).

25. See St. Maximos the Confessor, *Questions and Answers on Scripture* 142: «The Word of God is hidden in His Ten Commandments, and He condescends to be present in us when we keep them» (CCSG 10:101).

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His creation (cf. Jn 5:30-32). Whatever God tells us is trustworthy; whatever He promises will come to pass. God's testimony is so reliable that it grants wisdom even to children, since it confirms them in their faith and belief. The *testimony of the Lord brings wisdom to infants*, that is, it grants wisdom to those who have the trust and simplicity of children. A child does not have a developed sense of his own thoughts, or of his own will. Instead he has the simplicity of heart to accept and have faith in what he is told. In the same way, a person of simple heart can accept the entire testimony of the Lord, which is the revelation of the Lord Himself. From another point of view, «testimony» designates the revelatory activity of God that leads us to faith, to trust, to an understanding of the teachings of the Church. Thus the *testimony of the Lord* grants knowledge of the divinity to those who had not understood it. It is a revelation of the inner mystery of theology.

9 *The statutes of the Lord are upright, gladdening the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is far-shining, enlightening the eyes.*

In Greek the word «statute» is derived from the word for «justice» (which is also translated as «righteousness») and thus the revelation of the Lord's *statutes* is a revelation of what is just and right. The *statutes of the Lord*, moreover, *are upright*. According to another version of the text, the «statues of the Lord are straight», like a road or path providing us with immediate access to God. If you conform to the «statutes» of God, to the things that God deems to be just, you will immediately be united to Him. Don't focus on what you think is right, or what you think justice is, but on what the Lord says is just. That is the only way to *gladden your heart*. The sweetest joy of life is to know the will of the Lord, to understand the direction in which He wants to move, and how far

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He wants to go. The *statutes of the Lord* are not burdens to be endured, not requirements to be fulfilled, not the forced imposition of something into our heart, for the Lord will not enter your heart if you don't want Him too.

*The commandment of the Lord is far-shining, enlightening eyes.* The psalmist now introduces the word «commandment», which to most of us sounds like an «order», something that must be carried out or else there will be severe penalties. This seems to run counter to the experience of freedom that we just mentioned, and to a certain extent this is true. The reason for this tension is the fact that we are rebellious, self-willed creatures. We love to oppose and contradict, to impose our own individual logic on things, and to define «justice» in ways that are narrow and self-serving. Even so, it remains true that no one is forced to keep the Lord's commandments; they are there for anyone who wants them. If, however, we reject them, we do not thereby absolve ourselves of responsibility. It is true, then, that God's law is something that we are required to accept, but not in the way you might think. The psalmist says that *the commandment of the Lord is far-shining, enlightening eyes.* What he's telling us is that the commandments are required in the same way that light is required for vision. The *commandment of the Lord* commends itself to us in virtue of its shining brightness, without which we could not see or even live. This law and this light contain no traces of darkness, for they are the very energies of God. Moreover, since God is light, it is only natural that His law should not be a mere «order» like human laws, but rather something *far-shining*, a ray of light from His own existence, an energy of the uncreated God. As we've already said, «statutes» and «commandments» are not written texts collected in a book of rules, but the Lord Himself, the luminous expression of His own light, like rays of fiery brilliance flashing forth from His mouth.



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The «eyes» which the psalmist says are «enlightened» are spiritual eyes, and they are enlightened when the Lord shines His light into our soul. However, He does not take away your ability to close your eyes, to remain in darkness, if that is what you wish. Thus «enlightened eyes» are the eyes of a person who has freely turned to the Lord; who has freely welcomed the light of God into his life. This light penetrates the depths of the soul and scatters the darkness. It purifies the soul of its passions. To understand and keep the commandments of the Lord is to enter into the open place of spiritual joy and delight. When we welcome the light of the commandment, our heart is purified and becomes a worthy dwelling place for Christ.

10 *The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring unto ages of ages;  
the judgments of the Lord are true, altogether justified,*

Once our heart is purified of the passions, we are able personally to communicate with God. Within the larger experience of what we have called the «teaching» of God, there are different steps and stages. Previously we had the silence of creation. Now we have the voice of God. Creation keeps silent, for now we have the Lord speaking, teaching, and revealing His saving commandments. First there was silence, now there is the speech, communication.

*The fear of the Lord is pure.* In using the word «fear», the psalmist does not mean what we normally understand by this word. Here, «fear» is another word for the teaching of the Lord, for His statutes and commandments. When you keep the commandments of the Lord, you will begin to have an authentic, substantive relationship with God.<sup>26</sup> And your stance toward God, your

26. Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *First Century on Various Texts* 70:

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approach to and contact with Him, will initially take the form of «fear», because *the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* (Prov 1:7). God's law calls forth fear and respect, and this is what initially binds us to Him. Moreover, the psalmist says that this fear is «pure», which means that it is untainted, holy, and therefore makes us holy because it binds us to God. When the *fear of the Lord* enters our heart we begin directly to communicate with God, to experience union with Him.

We can say, then, that from this point of view «fear» is identical with faith. Fear is the beginning of faith, for it is the beginning of faithful contact with God. This is not a subjective psychological feeling, but rather my consciousness – the becoming conscious within myself – of the presence, the life, and the activity of God Himself. It is a state of ecstasy in the face of God's dazzling brightness, in the face of His awesome majesty. Thus, the «fear» of God is a form of contemplation, a form of immediate inner percep-

«He who does not fear God as judge but holds Him in awe because of the surpassing excellence of His infinite power will not justly lack anything; for having reached perfection in love, he loves God with awe and fitting reverence. He has acquired the *fear that endures unto ages of ages* (Ps 19:9)» (*Philokalia* 2:80); and id., *On the Lord's Prayer*: «David the psalmist says, *the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring unto ages of ages* (Ps 19:9), because he knows that of all things fear is best able to preserve divine love. Such a fear is, he realizes, very different from the fear of being punished for crimes. This second type of fear is indeed ousted and destroyed by love, as John the Evangelist makes clear when he writes, *Love casts out fear* (1 Jn 4:18). But the fear David is talking about is a natural expression of the law of true tenderness; and it is through this fear that the saints always keep intact the rule and practice of love, both for God and for each other» (*Philokalia* 2:285). See also St. Peter of Damascus, «The Two Kinds of Fear» (*Philokalia* 3:216-218; cf. 271); and Sts. Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos, «On the Second and Perfect Kind of Fear» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:220), all citing Psalm 19:9.

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tion, which nonetheless draws us out of ourselves, leading us to love and worship God.

*The judgments of the Lord are true, altogether justified.* «Judgments» are expressions of the one judgment: the abiding will of the Lord to appear to us. «Judgments» include all that the Lord has given you, and all that He wishes to give you. And these judgments are «true». They contain nothing that is false, deceitful, or impure. They are all like a great light that enters inside you and reveals whatever is misshapen and dark. In using the word «true», the psalmist acknowledges that his own judgment by God has been true and right. He is expressing his conviction that all the soul's experiences, all that God does in relation to the human soul, is true and just. And because these things are true they are also eternal. There will not come a time when such truths will cease being true. Human truths, which have been constructed in relation to the world of time and change, do not have this abiding, eternal quality.

These judgments, moreover, are *altogether justified*. God's will for humanity, His commandments and statutes, His entry into our hearts, are truths that have been demonstrated and proved by the experience of countless ages. They have been *justified*, proven to be true and correct, by all the saints, who experienced them personally. Anyone who wishes to experience and know this has only to humble himself and welcome Christ in his heart. The word «altogether» has the sense of «being in one place», as if all the evidence were gathered together in one place so that you might see it and experience its truth. Indeed, no part of it, *not a single iota, not the smallest dot* (cf. Mt 5:18) will ever pass away.

11 *More to be desired than gold and much precious stone,  
and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.*

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In the presence of God, in the presence of the One Who has entered our heart, we experience a sense of fear. We are overtaken by a palpable sense of His majesty, of His glory, but also by joy and increasing desire, for what we experience is *more to be desired than gold and much precious stone, and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb*. The words «desired» and «sweeter» signify the involvement and response of my whole being. The depths of my heart, all my senses, all my knowledge, are intensely engaged in the intoxicating experience of divine sweetness. But what is more important than this is that the One Whom I desire is incomparably better and more beautiful than anything in the world, better than gold and sweeter than honey.<sup>27</sup>

12 *For Your servant keeps them,  
and in keeping them there is much reward.*

As we have seen elsewhere, the word «for» indicates an objective fact, a certainty. Having kept the Lord's commandments, the psalmist is absolutely certain about what he says. And what is this? That the person who keeps the commandments receives a great reward, namely, God Himself. This is why he says *in keeping them there is much reward*. «It is my task to keep the commandments, O Lord, and Your task to reward me with Your presence».

13 *As for transgressions, who will understand them?  
Cleanse me from my secret sins.*

27. Compare St. Peter of Damascus, *The Fourth Stage of Contemplation*: «Lord Jesus Christ, Son and Logos of God, the most tender name of our salvation, great is Your glory, great are Your works, marvelous are Your words, *sweeter than honey and the honeycomb* (Ps 19:11)» (*Philokalia* 3:129).

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Here we need to take note of the psalmist's clarity of expression, which reveals his precise knowledge of human nature. «I am nothing, O Lord, nothing but a sinner, and *as for my transgressions, who will understand them?*» Who could possibly count up and even begin to understand the sinful things that we have within ourselves, and which have so deeply stained and disfigured our lives? From the moment of my conception, my life has been implicated in sin (cf. Ps 51:5). After it's been dipped in water, a mop can be squeezed out and fill a bucket. That's what I am, a dirty mop that has absorbed every manner of sin, and which refuses and resists any concentrated effort that might wring it dry. But you, O God, are forever pure, holy, glorious, and at any time You can enter into me and *cleanse me from my secret sins*.

From the majesty of God's glory, we progressed to the notion of His statutes, which in turn led us to the notion of God's purity and holiness, in contrast to which we obtain an *understanding* of our own sinfulness, of our *transgressions*. What do we mean here by «understanding»? Is it like reading a book and understanding ideas in the text? No. It's deeper than that. This kind of «understanding» is not a matter of intellectual comprehension, but engages us at the level of will and desire. It is a matter of asking God for the gift of insight and understanding, and when He gives it you will immediately understand everything. All the things that once seemed so difficult to understand now appear so simple. *Who can understand transgressions?* No one. But that's how it looks from the cloudy, confused perspective of sin. God's wisdom and power cut through this confusion, and when I am united to Him, His understanding becomes mine.

*Cleanse me from my secret sins.* Having mentioned his unworthiness, his nothingness, the psalmist immediately thinks of his *secret sins*, and this is a sign of his boldness of speech before God,

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of the good disposition of his heart. This, however, is not a confession of sins, but an acknowledgment of problems in the soul. The psalmist confesses that his soul is filled with much that requires purification, yet these things do not distance him from God. The fact that he is in union with the holy God does not mean that he ceases to be a sinner. And this is precisely the sign of God's majesty, the depth and height of His perfection. «You, Who are the glorious and holy God, deign to be united to me, a puddle of mud, something dirty, a mop heavy with sin. Despite all my efforts, I remain ignorant concerning my hidden, secret sins, and so I ask You to cleanse me».<sup>28</sup>

It is not so much the consciousness of sinfulness that prompts us to repent—for this can often harden us in our sins—but rather the consciousness of God's holiness and glory, which enables us to understand God and desire to grow in likeness to Him. Yet there are things I do in ignorance, or perhaps from carelessness, and it is from these that I now need to be cleansed.

14 *And spare me, Your servant, from the foreigners,  
If they do not rule over me, I shall be blameless,  
and cleansed from a great sin.*

28. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Christian Mode of Life*: «Every proud man is an abomination to the Lord (Prov 16:5), and one could find many passages in other books condemning those things which are hidden in our souls. So wicked and hard to cure and strong are those things possessed in the depths of our souls that it is not possible to rub them out and to remove them through human efforts and virtue alone, unless through prayer we take the power of the Spirit as an ally and, in this way, conquer the evil which is playing the tyrant within us, as the Spirit teaches us through the voice of David: *Cleanse me from my secret sins* (Ps 19:13)» (FOTC :137)

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This verse is often understood as if the psalmist were saying, «let me not, O Lord, participate in the sins of other men. Grant me the strength so that I can resist temptation, and not allow others to drag me into sin. My own sins are enough for me; I don't need to add any more». But this is not correct. The weight of meaning falls rather on the psalmist's consciousness that he is God's *servant*, and on the knowledge of what this service implies. The mention of «foreigners» signifies whatever is foreign and alien to God. It's as if he were saying: «God, since I've asked You to come into my soul, do not allow anything evil to enter my heart, since this will separate us». Others have understood David to be saying: «Lord, I am You servant. Spare me, then, from foreign gods», so that sin is associated with idolatry. «Spare me from sin, O God, because to love, to be dominated by anything else but You, is idolatry».<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, idols can be things within us, especially our prideful sense of self, which deludes us into putting ourselves on a pedestal, into believing we're better than others, and that we deserve their admiration and praise. It is not but chance that pride is the sin of the devil, for when a person has been united to God, the only thing that can separate him from God is his own pride, his strong tendency to reaffirm his ego and make it the central thing in his life. Instead of building a place of rest for God, I am busy constructing my imaginary world of illusory consolations. The secret sin, which we scrupulously avoid acknowledging, is the extent

29. Compare St. Makarios of Egypt, *The Great Letter*: «Know that the passions hidden deeply in us are not from our nature, but come from an outside source. For it is said: *Cleanse me from my secret sins and spare me from the foreigners* (Ps 19:13-14). Therefore, the hidden forces of those who do evil things and foreigners waging war, are they not spirits of evil, who oppose the virtues of Christ?» (trans. G. Maloney, 254).

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to which we don't know God at all, and that we worship instead a false image of our self.

*If they do not rule over me.* «If I am not conquered by these selfish, alien desires; if I am not blinded by my pride; if I do not seek consolation from something other than God, then *I shall be blameless*; I shall be cleansed, purged of the *great sin*». What is this «great sin»? It is the distance that separates me from God. It is my refusal to repent so that this gap might be closed. It is my worship of idols, my inability to decide whether I want to worship God or my self. It is the conflict I enter into with God, like two gods about to fight a battle. So David is saying, «if, by means of Your grace, O God, these things fail to triumph over me, then I can be delivered from this terrible distance that separates us, from my apostasy and ignorance of God, from this great sin».

The psalmist is concerned with the knowledge of God through revelation, which takes place in different ways. If the kingdom of heaven is the knowledge of God, it follows that the greatest sin is ignorance of God. The essential element of the «great sin» is ignorance of God. «Spare me, O Lord, from this great sin; grant that I may never be without Your light, without the knowledge of You». Ignorance of God is always a sign that relations with God have broken down, have been terminated, whereas the knowledge of God leads one to union with Him. «If I am not defeated by the great sin, by my ego, then my communion with God will not be broken. On the contrary, my experience of God will become increasingly direct».

15 *And the sayings of my mouth will be pleasing,  
and the meditation of my heart will be before You always,  
O Lord, my helper and redeemer.*



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The psalm concludes with these beautiful words.<sup>30</sup> Until now, the psalmist had placed us in the presence of God, but now he opens his heart to God, a heart into which God Himself has entered. «*And the sayings of my mouth will be pleasing*. I want You to be pleased by my words, to accept my prayer like a fragrant offering, *like incense before You* (Ps 141:2)». In the words of another psalm: *Let my meditation be pleasing to You* (Ps 104:34).

*And the meditation of my heart will be before You always*. «My heart beats only for You, O God. You alone are the *meditation of my heart*, and in Your presence I will always meditate. All that I do shall be done in Your presence. Just as You descend to me, and I see You, and feel You, and love You, so too shall You see me and love me. Just as You come to me, I shall come to You. We shall run to each other, and meet in a mutual embrace».

*O Lord, my helper and redeemer*. «As all of my life shows, You are my helper. You are the One Who saved me time and again from whatever it was that threatened me. You saved me from myself, and gave me Your Self instead. And this means that You are *my redeemer*». It is with this cry of inner, spiritual knowledge that the psalm closes. «Every day of my life, in all the details of my life, You are my helper. In respect of my inner life, You are my redeemer, my Savior. Whether I'm moving or sitting, asleep or awake, when I sing to You, when I breathe, You are all things for me, *my helper and redeemer*».

In this psalm, we come very close to God, touching Him through creation, through the natural world. This is the silent descent of God, His descent from the heavens into my heart. My heart re-

<sup>30</sup>. This verse has been adopted as the conclusion to the silent prayer recited three times daily in Jewish worship.

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ceives Him because it had already heard of Him; it had already paid attention to the sound of Him. The universe and the human heart were created by the same God, and it is He Who reveals Himself in both.

God is presented as descending and being revealed, but His revelation is something that unfolds gradually, in stages, from the silence of creation to the cry of the heart. Indeed it can occur even in the cry of the passions, from which God can purify me and liberate me. The soul needs to be purified, but especially the intellect, since this is a question of revelation, which is something given to the intellect, to man's spirit. When God frees us from the passions, He grants us an inner, spiritual perception of things; a deeper knowledge of created things, indeed the perception of God Himself. Then we arrive at the fear of God, which is closely aligned with faith and knowledge, which flow from our deepening union with God.

In order for us to understand this psalm, we need to realize that the psalmist is a man filled with love for God and gifted with spiritual vision. His delight is to contemplate the Bridegroom descending from the heavens. In all of his visions, he delights in the experience of being held in God's hands. The psalmist sees all and yet sees nothing, for within all things he sees God. He is separated from all things; he finds nothing to love in the world, and so has turned with all his soul and spirit to God. The only meditation of his heart and of his intellect is God. In this psalm, then, we see the descent and manifestation of God, as well as the heart that sees Him and loves Him.

The warmth of God fills the entire universe. It leaves no one untouched or outside its activity. And yet most of us manage to remain outside it, bereft of it. How strange! God is everywhere, and

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yet so many of us are alone, isolated, shivering outside in the cold. And this condition is a state of death, for true death consists in estrangement from God. Yet God has the power to *convert souls*, to restore them to life, to make them conscious of His presence, to make them want to bathe in His warmth. If we do not feel this warmth, if our hearts are cold and have no desire for God, then we should turn to God with tears and ask Him to restore *the meditation of our heart*. Let us become like children, so that God might *grant us wisdom*; so that He might lead us to the knowledge of the eternal truth, so that we might live in eternal union with Him.



10  
Psalm 103 (LXX 102)

A psalm of David.

- 1 *Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me bless His holy name.*
- 2 *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits,*
- 3 *For He is gracious to all your iniquities,  
and heals all your infirmities,*
- 4 *He redeems your life from corruption,  
and He crowns you with mercy and compassion,*
- 5 *He fulfills your desire with good things;  
your youth will be renewed as the eagle's.*
- 6 *The Lord performs deeds of mercy,  
and executes judgment for all that have been wronged.*
- 7 *He made His ways known to Moses,  
and His will to the sons of Israel.*
- 8 *The Lord is compassionate and merciful,  
long-suffering and rich in mercy;*
- 9 *He will not be angry unto the end,  
neither will He be wrathful forever.*
- 10 *He has not requited us according to our transgressions,  
neither has He dealt with us according to our sins.*
- 11 *For as high as heaven is from the earth,  
so greatly has He made His mercy to prevail  
for them that fear Him.*
- 12 *As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has He removed our iniquities from us.*
- 13 *Like a father has compassion on his sons,  
so has the Lord had compassion on them that fear Him.*

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- 14 *For He knows of what we are made,  
He remembers that we are dust.*
- 15 *As for man, his days are like the grass;  
he blossoms like a flower of the field;*
- 16 *For when the wind passes over it, it is gone,  
and it will no longer know its place.*
- 17 *But the mercy of the Lord is from age to age unto them that fear Him,  
and His righteousness is upon sons of sons;*
- 18 *Upon them that keep His covenant  
and remember to keep His commandments.*
- 19 *The Lord has prepared His throne in heaven,  
and His kingdom rules over all.*
- 20 *Bless the Lord, all you His angels, mighty in strength,  
that perform His word,  
to hear the voice of His words;*
- 21 *Bless the Lord, all you His hosts,  
His ministers that do His will;*
- 22 *Bless the Lord, all you His works,  
in every place of His dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul!*

\*

\*   \*

As we've said on previous occasions, the titles of the psalms often provide us with significant information about the meaning of the psalm, although in this instance we are told simply that this is «a psalm of David». By now it should be clear to us that David was a man who lived close to God. We have seen how he sought to converse with God every day, and how the psalms are the poetic expressions of his spiritual experiences.

PSALM ONE HUNDREND AND THREE

1 *Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me bless His holy name.*

The psalmist begins by expressing his strong desire to praise God. We discover the meaning of our existence only when our life becomes an act of worship, a gift of praise offered in gratitude and love to God. Because the desire to *bless the Lord* is something deeply rooted in human nature, the psalmist refers to the soul's inner contents, to *all that is within me*, for *the good man from the treasure of his heart brings forth good, and his mouth speaks from the abundance of his heart* (cf. Lk 6:45). The psalmist's soul is filled with feelings of worship and praise, and this interior disposition is externalized through the power of speech: *bless the Lord, O my soul*.<sup>1</sup>

To «bless» another person means to speak well of him, or to wish or pray that he might receive something good. With respect of God, however, to «bless» means to praise and glorify Him. The word «soul» does not refer merely to the spiritual element, but indicates the fullness of human life; it signifies the self as a whole. What is expressed here is the impulse of the entire person to glorify God; the desire of the whole self, of *all that is within me*, to praise and glorify God's *holy name*. By using the word «soul» the psalmist wants to emphasize that the desire to praise God is something foundational, rooted in the living principle of our existence, making this an expression of the vital, living nature of his relation to God.

1. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 103*: «The soul stands midway between the body and the spirit, and so can either drag the body down to base pleasures, or draw the spirit up to God, and thus David charges his soul to *bless the Lord* (Ps 103:1), which means to glorify God always» (PG 55:641).

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Why, though, is he speaking to himself?<sup>2</sup> Why is he calling on himself, urging and inciting himself to glorify God? Because *the flesh is weak* (cf. Mt 26:41). When it comes to spiritual matters, we tend to get tired very easily, and so David is admonishing himself, stirring up the drowsy powers of his soul, and by extension our feeble and lethargic human nature. «Come on, get up!» he's saying, «don't lie there sleeping all day; wake up! For you are in the grip of sleep and dreams».<sup>3</sup> To be sure, even the most spiritual person is in constant danger of becoming lethargic, for the soul has a tendency to slacken and sink downwards, and the body feels the gravitational pull of the earth, which seeks to dissolve us into the dust from which we were created (cf. Gen 3:19).<sup>4</sup>

In the first part of this verse, then, we see two things. First, that the words and images are the representations of an inner experience, of a powerful feeling inundating the soul. But the same words express a kind of struggle, a cry of the heart's desire, which

2. The psalmist's exhortation to his inner self to bless the Lord is unusual in the psalms, and is repeated at the beginning of Psalm 104.

3. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm* 103: «David rouses himself from sleep, prescribing the act of blessing the Lord as an excellent medicine for salvation» (PG 27:432); and Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm* 103: «Here the soul is taught to rouse itself, and to disperse the clouds of forgetfulness, and so to call to mind the good things God has done for it» (PG 80:1685).

4. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Beatitudes* 2: «There is a great tendency towards evil in nature, which is quick to turn towards the worse. For example, heavy bodies never move upwards; but if they are flung down from a high mountain ridge, their own weight accelerates the movement, so that they are borne downwards with such force that their speed defies description» (ACW 18:101); id., *On the Life of Moses* 224 (trans. A. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 113).



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encompasses the entire person in the course of its movement toward God.

*And all that is within me.* In Psalm 38, we came across a reference to «the loins» as a symbol of human inwardness.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the words *all that is within me* are a reference to the soul's various powers, which were believed to have their seat deep within the inner organs, collectively known as the «bowels».<sup>6</sup> The «heart» in particular was held to be the seat of feelings and emotions. The «liver» was thought to be the seat of deliberation, and thus associated with the power of attraction and repulsion in human decision-making. The «kidneys» were generally associated with the power of desire. Thus, it's as if the psalmist were saying: «Whatever is real and genuine within me – the impulse of my soul and spirit to communicate with God, along with all my powers of feeling and perception – let these things in unison bless the Lord».

The «soul», as we said, indicates the self as a whole, with empha-

5. See above, Psalm 38:8 (chap. 8).

6. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On the Psalms*: «When we speak of the 'eye' of the soul, this is a metaphor based on the eye of the body. So too with the soul's 'womb' or 'belly,' which one would not err in calling the power of memory, for it is the receptacle of spiritual nourishment. This is why David says *bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me* (Ps 103:1), and why the Savior says *if anyone thirst let him come to me and drink, and out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water* (Jn 7:37-38). From this it is clear that the Savior called the power of mind and memory, indeed the ruling part of the soul, a 'belly' deep within us» (PG 23:268); Evagrius of Pontus, *On Psalm 103*: «By *all that is within me* (Ps 103:1) he means all the power of the *image of God* (Gen 1:26) that is within us, such as the power of the intellect, the mind, memory, insight, imagination, and the like» (ΒΕΠΕΣ 80:212); and Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm 102*: «By *all that is within me* (Ps 103:1) he means his thoughts, his memories, and all the movements of the soul» (PG 80:1685).

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sis on the inner, spiritual element of the person. The *all that is within me* is likewise a reference to the self, with the accent on interiority (cf. Dt 6:5). Consequently we have a parallelism between these two parts of the verse, which is strengthened by the fact that «the Lord» and «His holy name» designate the same object, the same reality.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul.* «Let my soul communicate directly with the Lord». In his efforts to draw near to the Lord, the psalmist speaks of the Lord's *holy name*.<sup>7</sup> A name is a mode of presence; it is the presence of the person. Thus when the psalmist speaks of the Lord's *holy name*, he is speaking of the Lord Himself, Who is present before him in His majesty, actively revealing His power and strength, which are the marks and signs of His presence.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the psalmist calls this name *holy* in order to distinguish the presence of the Lord from all other presences; to mark off the divine name from all other names, for it is a unique name, the absolute name, to which *every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth* (cf. Phil 2:9-10). He does not say, «the

7. Compare Psalms 33:21; 105:3; 106:47; 145:21.

8. Compare Origen, *On Prayer* 24: «A 'name' is a designation that sums up and describes the particular quality of the one named. For example, the Apostle Paul has a certain quality all his own, both of soul by which he is what he is, and of mind by which he can contemplate certain things, and of body by which he is a certain way. Thus, the special character of these qualities, which is incompatible with anyone else, is indicated by the name 'Paul,' for no one else is exactly like him in these respects. But in the case of human beings, individuating qualities are subject to change, and thus their names are rightly changed. For when the quality of 'Abram' was changed, he was called 'Abraham' (Gen 17:5); and when 'Simon' was changed, he was called 'Peter' (Mk 3:16; Jn 1:42); and when 'Saul' stopped persecuting Christ, he became 'Paul' (Acts 13:9). In the case of God, however, Who is unchangeable, there is always a single name, as spoken of Him in Exodus: 'I Am' (Ex 3:14), or something that would have the same significance» (trans. R. Greer, 129).

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*most holy*», but simply «*holy*», for with respect to this name there are no comparisons: it alone is holy. The invocation of the holy name is the psalmist's way of making the divine presence palpable, actually present, so that he might glorify God and worship Him.

*2 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.*

The repetition of the phrase, *bless the Lord, O my soul*, creates a certain grandness of expression, like the majestic, rolling movement of successive waves, or a rising flood of light, so that the sense of the words is both deepened and illumined.

*And forget not all His benefits.* «Arise, O my soul, and do not forget for even a single moment all the benefits you have received from the Lord». <sup>9</sup> What are the Lord's «benefits»? They are His various gifts, His benefactions; they are the *good and perfect gifts that come down from above, from the Father of lights* (Jas 1:17). These gifts are God's grace, and «grace» means something this is given absolutely free. Yet God's grace is not given without regard

9. Compare St. Mark the Ascetic, *Letter to Nikolaos the Solitary*. «Bring before your eyes the blessings, whether physical or spiritual, conferred on you from the beginning of your life down to the present, and call them repeatedly to mind in accordance with the words: *forget not all His benefits* (Ps 103:2)» (*Philokalia* 1:152); and Evagrius of Pontus, *On Thoughts* 23: «It is necessary to encourage the anchorite's soul with spiritual words and to speak to him the words of holy David, *bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits, for He is gracious to all your iniquities, and heals all your infirmities, He redeems your life from corruption, He crowns you with mercy and compassion* (Ps 103:2-4). These are the sorts of things you should say to him, like a mother who seeks diligently for her child at a festival for fear that some malefactor seize and make off with him; and especially through intense prayer ever invite his soul to turn to the Lord» (trans. R. Sinckewicz, 169).

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to who we are, but always in the measure of our desire, always in terms relative to the degree that we have turned to God. The one who *seeks shall find*, and the one who diligently *knocks on the door* will eventually see it open (cf. Lk 11:9-10). Thus, God will bestow His benefits on me according to the measure of my desire, to the degree of my perception, my praises, my union with and glorification of Him.

Instead of «benefits», another version of this verse says «praises», which is the proper response to the bestowal of the Lord's gifts. It is the same thing looked at from two different points of view: from the side of man, who praises God for His gifts, and from the side of God, Who gives us His grace.

*And forget not all His benefits.* You can't glorify God if you've forgotten the good things He's done for you (cf. Dt 6:12; 8:11). We consider the loss of memory to be a diminishment of human life, but that is nothing when compared to forgetting about God. The memory, the recollection, of God's activity is what moves us to praise and glorify Him. If I fail to remember what God has done for me, if I forget Who God *is* for me, then I cease to glorify Him. Even if I go to church and sing His praises with my mouth, it won't make any difference. If I've forgotten Him, my heart will remain far from such praises, unaffected by them, for it is a dead heart, and *He is not the God of the dead, but of the living* (Mt 22:32). Consequently the remembrance of God is an essential element of true doxology.<sup>10</sup>

10. The movement described here is essentially that of the liturgical offering, in which God's blessings are returned to God in a response of love and gratitude; cf. St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Celestial Hierarchy* 1.1: «Every good benefaction and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights (Jas 1:17). But there is something more. Inspired by the

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We see, then, the unity of the various elements in these two verses. The exhortation to bless the Lord; the invocation of His holy name; the desire to praise Him, all constitute the turning of the heart toward God. And these activities – to remember, to recollect, to bless, and to call upon the name – are presuppositions for union with God. At the same time, they are the characteristic activities of a person who is already united to God. To remember God means to be present with God, to be united with Him. This is why the Jesus Prayer, which is a constant recollection of the divine name, is the most perfect prayer there is, for it places us immediately in the divine presence. If you want your heart to be silent, stop talking and think about what God has done. The moment you forget God, your heart will immediately begin to grow cold and die.

*3 For He is gracious to all your iniquities.  
and heals all your infirmities.*

What does it mean to be «gracious»? What kind of person is gracious? One who looks on me sympathetically, favorably, with good will. This is what we mean when we ask God to be gracious to us: to look upon us graciously. «Do not look upon me in anger, but with graciousness, goodness, kindness, and gentleness». Because God is gracious, He does not reckon your iniquities in terms of their size, number, or significance, but in terms of His goodness,

Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously towards us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father Who gathers us in. For, as the sacred Word says, *from Him and to Him are all things* (Rom 11:36)» (trans. C. Luibheid, 145).

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according to His graciousness. In this verse, God's greatest attribute, His most magnificent trait, comes to the fore: His love.

As for my «iniquities», they are all the things that separate me from God. They are the crimes that I have committed which have put me in conflict with God's law, and thus with God Himself. «God, if You were to take all of my iniquities into account, all of my transgressions, then we would have to part ways, be separated from each other. If, however, You examine me in the light of Your goodness, Your graciousness, then You will necessarily come close to me and we will be together. My own life is nothing but a tortured flight from You; an endless running away. Everything I do takes me further away from You. But Your life, Your love, Your activity, is a bending down to me. If I run, You pursue me (cf. Ps 23:6), and because You can run toward me faster than I can run away from You, You will always overtake me (cf. Ps 59:11)».

*And heals all your infirmities.* An «infirmity» is a weakness, often due to a sickness or disease, and this verse, along with others, has created the impression that David suffered from various illnesses. This however strikes me as a rather questionable interpretation, and in any case fails to look beyond ordinary, everyday experience. It seems to me that David is searching more deeply in his soul, and so says «Lord, be gracious not only to my sins and transgressions, but to my infirmities, to my sickness as well».

What sort of infirmity is he talking about here? It is the sickness of my soul, the passions that I have within myself, which prompt me to sin time and again. To be sure, a passion is not always a sin, although an iniquity, a transgression, is always something hostile and opposed to God. For example, I may have a problem with anger. That's my passion, my weakness, my infirmity. But that's not yet a sin. However, if I become angry with you because you hurt me in some way, that is a sin. Thus David is asking God, not

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simply for mercy for the particular sins he has committed, but to heal the deeper, underlying causes of his sinfulness. «You, O God, are the One Who restores my soul to its original wholeness, to its condition of freedom from the passions, which is true health».

*4 He redeems your life from corruption,  
He crowns you with mercy and compassion.*

How powerful are these successive verbs describing God's activity! They make God's presence so palpable; they bring Him so near to us! We see Him coming ever closer to us in a series of successive images, actively working for our salvation. Have you sinned? He is gracious and merciful. Have you refrained from sinning? He enters into your heart and makes it new. And even if your life has become exceedingly corrupt, He will redeem you. What does «corruption» mean? It is decay, putrefaction. If God has not found you, then you are in a state of decay; in the process of falling apart. Your wound is festering, producing a stench. But the Lord is the One Who delivers you from the stench of your sins, *redeeming your life from corruption*.

The meaning is this: even if you've committed sins, even if you've fallen into a pool of filth, in which you're rotting away with no hope of escape, God comes and redeems you, He frees you, He cleanses you, and restores you to your former beauty and dignity. In these verses, the psalmist brings God very close to us. He shows us just how far God's love is willing to go. Even if you're so corrupt and rotten as to be totally ruined, He gives you a new self, a new, clean heart (cf. Ps 51:12; Ezek 36:26). God takes a person whom sin has damaged, broken, destroyed, and rendered useless, and does not simply restore him to his original state, but gives him a new self, as if he had never fallen into sin.

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*He redeems your life from corruption.* God can appear at the moment of your death and restore you to life; though you have grown old in sin, He can make you young again. Once you were a young man or woman, but now you have grown old. Yet he has the power to make you, not simply young again, but as innocent and pure as a baby. He enfolds you in the womb of His love and refashions you; He recreates you fresh from the beginning, granting you His own purity and newness.<sup>11</sup>

The Hebrew says «He redeems your life from the pit». In the very moment when you're enjoying your life without God; when you're doing all sorts of things to please yourself; when you're satisfying all your desires, thinking that you're the king of the world, you fail to notice something: with your head in the air you forget to look down at the ground in front of you, where a massive pit opens its jaws before you. What you thought was so delightful was essentially your grave, because in fact you were far from God. But when you least suspect it, with no warning at all, God can shake you and say «Wake up!» And He does this because He sees the last little trembling glimmer of your inner light about to be extinguished forever. And even though your little candle was about to be blown out, leaving your heart filled only with smoke and ashes, God transforms you into a radiant lamp, a living reflection of His own light.

*He crowns you with mercy and compassion.* God's mercy and compassion are His uncreated energies, the externalization and

11. Compare St. John of Karpathos, *To the Monks in India* 5: «It is to the Lord, then, that you should ascribe the grace of purity, for He did not surrender you to the desires of your flesh and blood, and to the impure spirits that trouble and corrupt them, for He has *redeemed your life from corruption* (Ps 103:4)» (*Philokalia* 1:300).



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manifestation of His goodness. God does not simply *redeem your life from corruption*, but *crowns you* so that you are like a conqueror decorated with laurels of victory. It's as if you were surrounded, as if your doom were all but certain, and your enemies were already relishing your defeat, when all of a sudden the tables turn and the victim becomes the victor. In the very moment that your enemies were about to celebrate your demise, they suddenly see you wearing the crown of victory. Everything has been turned around. Not only does God rescue us from danger, but He anoints us as victors, escorting us to the highest level of glory that a human being can attain. For what does it mean that He *crowns us with mercy and compassion* except that He grants us His own self as the prize?

On the other hand, the «crown» in question may not be derived from military traditions, but rather from the ancient Jewish liturgy. When the Jews held festivals and glorified God, they offered Him *a sacrifice of praise* (cf. Lev 7:12; Ps 50:14), and in making this special offering they wore festive, ceremonial garments including crowns on their heads (cf. Lev 23:40). In this way, the verse *He crowns you with mercy and compassion* marks the renewal of the covenantal bond between God and the community through the act of sacrifice. «Though I was at the point of death, I have returned, and wearing a crown and splendidly garbed I have come to the altar to offer God my praises».

Why does it say that «He» crowned you? Because you yourself did nothing to deserve crowns or robes or a place near the altar. And even if you did do something good, you couldn't have done it by yourself. It was God Who stripped you of your sins and subsequently clothed you in a garment of incorruptibility; it was He Who *crowned you with mercy and compassion*. And it was God alone Who placed you before the altar, uniting you to Himself

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through the act of worship, for the union of God and man is always centered on the altar. All of this is the gift of God's grace to you, because all things begin from and with Him.

*5 He fulfills your desire with good things;  
your youth will be renewed as the eagle's.*

Whatever you desire, whatever you require, God is ready to give it to you in abundance, to fill you with good things. But notice that it doesn't say «He fulfills your *desires*», but rather «your *desire*», because after God raises you up, He transforms you into person of single-minded desire, a person whose only desire is for God.<sup>12</sup> And it is because you desire God and seek Him that He offers you all the good things of this life and of the life to come. Recall the promise of the Gospel: *Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be yours as well* (Lk 12:31).

Instead of saying *He fulfills your desire with good things*, the Hebrew says «He fills your good with ornament», or perhaps «adornment», which picks up on the themes of the preceding verse. God is the one Who places you before His altar, and Who not only clothes you in ceremonial attire, but lavishly adorns your garments.

*Your youth will be renewed as the eagle's.* When you draw near to the altar and return once again to God, your *youth* is *renewed as the eagle's*. Even though the verb is actually in the future tense—«your youth *will be* renewed»—it does not restrict the action to an event later in time. Instead, it denotes an action that is cur-

12. Compare Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psalm 103*: «Because some desires are not good, and are prohibited by the divine law, it is well that the psalmist added *with good things* (Ps 103:5), for it is only our good desires that the Lord fulfills» (PG 80:1685).

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rently taking place, and which will continue to take place in the future. When the object of the verb is a condition like the state of corruption we mentioned a moment ago, then such verbs can be interpreted as referring to a moment in the future. If you're physically sick, even if you're drawing near to death, don't worry, because God is able to make you well. However, in the case of spiritual sickness, that is, in respect of the passions, experience affirms that *you will be renewed* continuously.

This verse may also have been influenced by various legends about eagles, which we will say more about in a moment. Or it may simply be a reference to moulting, when eagles shed their feathers in the process of changing their plumage, so that the growth of new feathers is understood as a «renewal». Either way, the point is that just as the eagle renews himself, so too, with the power of God, will you be renewed, restored to spiritual youth and vigor. Recall the words of Isaiah: *They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles* (Is 40:31). Whoever waits patiently for the Lord shall be continuously renewed; he shall not age or grow old, but shall remain perpetually young.<sup>13</sup>

According to legend, the eagle is the only bird that can look directly into the sun without suffering any harm.<sup>14</sup> With its eyes

13. Compare St. John of Karpathos, *To the Monks in India* 37: «God has shown His tender love to me, so that my *youth is renewed like the eagle's* (Ps 103:5). Previously I had grown old in sins and shameful passions, but now I am reborn in the fresh vigor of youth; material desires and actions had made me rough and hard, but now I am softened. God in His compassion has healed my intellect, and regaining my natural simplicity I can now see the things of this world clearly. My flesh, like that of Naaman the Syrian, has become as the flesh of a little child, because I have washed in the Jordan of spiritual knowledge (cf. 2 Kgs 5:14)» (*Philokalia* 1:306).

14. Many such legends are collected in the *Physiologos* («the Natural Scien-

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wide open, it contemplates the fiery rays, the brilliant flames of fire rising up in great arcs from the solar disc.<sup>15</sup> In a variation of the legend of the eagle's renewal, the bird is said to fly into the sun when the latter has reached its meridian, and then to turn and plunge into the ocean, from which it emerges with its youth renewed. Having absorbed the energy of the sun, the eagle plunges into the sea as if it were a womb of rebirth, a bath of renewal, for water symbolizes the power of birth and new life. The legend of the eagle, then, is a symbol of Christian baptism. Just as the eagle is reborn and renewed, so too does God *renew your youth*.

To bring some of these ideas together, we can say that the phras-

tist»), an ancient Christian exposition of the marvelous properties of animals, plants, and stones. About the eagle we are told the following: «David says *your youth will be renewed as the eagle's* (Ps 103:5), because when the eagle ages, its wings become heavy and its eyes become dull, at which point it seeks a pure body of water, and, flying close to the sun, it burns its wings and eyes, and then dives three times into the water, from which it emerges renewed and young again. In the same way, you too, who wear the heavy garments of the old man (cf. 1 Co 15:53-54; Col 3:10), and whose heart's eyes have grown dull, seek the spiritual fountain, the Word of God, the *fountain of living water* (Jer 2:13), and, soaring up into Jesus Christ, *the sun of righteousness* (Mal 4:2), *put off the old man and his practices* (Col 3:10), and be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and in this way David's prophecy will be fulfilled in you» (ed. F. Sbordone, 6.1-15).

15. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 103*: «The psalmist says, *your youth will be renewed as the eagle's* (Ps 103:5), for *you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator* (Col 3:10). So when he says *your youth will be renewed as an eagle's* (Ps 103:5), he means that you shall never grow old or suffer corruption, for the eagle is the king of the birds, soaring above the rest, and alone is able to look directly into the rays of the sun» (PG 23:1265); the same interpretation is given by St. Athanasios of Alexandria (PG 27:432).

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es, *your youth will be renewed as the eagle's* (Ps 103:5), and *they who wait for the Lord shall mount up with wings like eagles* (Is 40:31), have for us the following sense. Those who worship the Lord, waiting patiently for Him at His holy altar, and who continually gaze upon the beauty of the *sun of righteousness* (Mal 4:2), shall receive a share in His glory. They shall partake of His power of renewal and regeneration, for they shall participate in the very life of God.

It follows, then, that the renewal and refashioning of our corrupted nature is the result of our participation in the properties of God, and that this participation occurs in and through the worship of the Church. It is in the liturgical assembly, through prayer and the sacraments, that we experience and share in God's love and holiness. God ceaselessly «empties Himself» (cf. Phil 2:7), for no other reason than to fill us with Himself.<sup>16</sup>

These first five verses are marked by a striking rhythmical pattern – «He is gracious», «He heals», «He redeems», «He crowns», «He fills», «He renews» – it's like listening to a beautiful melody or the sounds of flowing waves.<sup>17</sup> The effect is very powerful and moving. With remarkable subtlety and sensitivity, the psalm touches all the chords of the soul, some of which are in tune with God, and others which are not. This is one of the most musical psalms in the

16. Compare St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Dialogue on the Trinity* 3 (473A): «Christ, through the Spirit, remodels us to His own image, and in a spiritual and ineffable manner imprints upon our souls the beauty of His own nature. And yet we are not transformed into God as such, but receive a form that is fitting to created nature, otherwise the words of the psalmist, *your youth will be renewed as the eagle's* (Ps 103:5) would have no meaning, since 'renewal' is nothing other than the restoration of our fallen nature» (SC 237:46).

17. The phenomenon described here is much more evident in the Greek, where the terms in question are all third person accusative participles, many with the same number of syllables and with rhyming endings.

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entire psalter, leading the liturgical assembly in a lively dance, in which the successive response of each choir is like a series of waves carrying the congregation closer to God. And the closer we come to God, the more He harmonizes the inner powers of our soul, so that all dissonance and discord are resolved into unity.<sup>18</sup>

6 *The Lord performs deeds of mercy,  
and executes judgment for all that have been wronged.*

«Mercy» is one of God's personal attributes; it is the manifestation of the truth that God is love (1 Jn 4:8). «Deeds of mercy» are the results of this love, the fruits of this love in action. They are the effects of the activity of God's love, and thus the signs of His own person. God is love, and so love is something that flows forth directly from His being.

*And executes judgment for all that have been wronged.* If the first part of this verse highlights God's love and mercy, the second part focuses on His judgment. Yet mercy and judgment go together, since the deeper meaning of the phrase *the Lord performs deeds of mercy* means that God judges us with mercy and not according to the standards of impersonal, abstract justice. To those who have been wronged, God *executes judgment*, and to those who have sinned, He *performs deeds of mercy*.

The paradoxical interaction of God's mercy and judgment is a major theme in the psalms (cf. Pss 33:5; 101:1; 115:5), and enables us to understand something about the depth of God's love. There

18. Compare St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter 1.4.2: «Organized yourselves into a choir, so that you might all be in unison, having one mind, taking the pitch given to you by God, singing in one voice through Jesus Christ to God the Father» (LCL 1:176).

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are of course many such paradoxes through which different aspects of God are revealed to us. It is through God's descent that we ascend; through His self-emptying that we are filled (cf. Phil 2:7; ). It is through His death that we live; through His suffering we are freed from suffering. Needless to say, these are not philosophical puzzles to be solved with pencil and paper. Instead, they are truths that only become intelligible through experience; only to the extent that we have died and been resurrected by God's *deeds of mercy*, by His love. We are fallen and sinful creatures, but it is God's duty to save us, give us life, and raise us up by His divine power.

*And executes judgment for all that have been wronged.* The ancient Israelites placed special emphasis on the concept of «justice», since this is something that was often glaringly absent from ancient civilizations. Whenever the Lord wanted to expose the failure and corruption of His people, He needed only to point to the unjust treatment of the poor, the widows, and the orphans (cf. Zach 7:10; Is 1:17, 23; Jer 5:28). The abuse and exploitation of the poor and the weak are sure signs that a society has fallen away from God, Who has identified Himself with the poor, the sick, the widows, the orphans, and all those suffering injustice. God came to earth in order to search for the *lost coin* (Lk 15:8-9); to rekindle the *smoldering wick* (Mt 12:20); to bind up and heal and heal the sick and the suffering. God mingles with the crowds in the streets; He has dinner with tax collectors and talks to prostitutes (Mt 9:11); He searches the dwellings of the poor in order to find those who are looking for Him, who are waiting for Him, and who need and desire Him.

7 *He made His ways known to Moses,  
and His will to the sons of Israel.*

«He is the One Who revealed and made *Himself* known to Moses».

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Here the psalmist returns to one of his favorite themes. God is not just any God, but the personal God Who established a covenant with the *sons of Israel*. And so with these words, the psalmist looks beyond himself and identifies himself with his people, and invokes the figure of Moses, who was pivotal in the formation of the Jewish people.

8 *The Lord is compassionate and merciful,  
long-suffering and rich in mercy*

With these four adjectives David expresses both the experience of God in his own life and in the life of Israel. He experienced God as *compassionate*, as *merciful*, and as *long-suffering and rich in mercy*, for these are indeed the characteristics of God.<sup>19</sup> Each adjective has its own significance.

God's «compassion» is exercised on behalf of human beings who are made of earth and are forever in danger of lapsing into non-existence. Such creatures can only be looked on with compassion. If something is very delicate and fragile, you'll handle it very carefully. Human nature demands that God act toward it with sensitivity and compassion.

God is also «merciful» to us because we forget that we are created from the earth; we forget that we are nothing, and act as if we were gods, or make a god out of our ego and our selfish desires. To such a creature, one can only be patient and show mercy.

19. The whole of verse 8 is a direct quotation of the revelation of the divine attributes to Moses in Exodus 34:6, and as such is introduced in the previous verse by «He made His ways known to Moses». However, Psalm 103 does not cite the remainder of the Exodus text, where God also says that «He will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children» (Ex 34:7), and thus the psalm places exclusive emphasis on God's compassion and forgiveness.



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God is «long-suffering», He exercises patience with us, because we are ignorant and rebellious; because we stubbornly resist Him. We are not interested in God because our attention is occupied with the fantasy life of our ego, our self-will, and our foolish plans. Israel was an especially stiff-necked and disobedient people, as God Himself has said (Ex 33:5; Dt 9:6). Yet in response to their hardness of heart, God was patient and showed great long-suffering. «Every day I act like I've forgotten what happened yesterday», God says. «Every day I act like I don't see what's going on; every day I forestall my wrath, postpone my judgment. I tell myself that maybe tomorrow things will be different. Maybe next year these barren trees will produce fruit, maybe these frozen hearts will thaw out a bit and show some tenderness and love».

God is «rich in mercy», because human sinfulness is as deep and as wide as the ocean. Mercy is God's response to actual transgression, to sinful actions, and not simply to things within the soul. Human transgressions are many, seemingly infinite, but they are far outdistanced by the mercies of God. In the words of the Hymn of Kassiani, «Who can the count the multitude of my sins or fathom the abyss of Your judgments?» He is the God of love and compassion, and it is to Him that we should run, confessing our sins, for we know that He is merciful.<sup>20</sup>

The psalmist feels God's presence and love in every aspect of his life, and he expresses it with these simple words: *The Lord is*

20. Compare St. Gregory Palamas, *A New Testament Decalogue*: «Him alone, therefore, the Master and Creator of all, you should glorify as God and through love you should cleave to Him; before Him you should repent day and night for your deliberate and unintentional lapses. For *He is compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and rich in mercy* (Ps 103:8)» (*Philokalia* 4:323-324).

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*compassionate and merciful, long-suffering and rich in mercy.* It would be pointless to underline the poetical character of these four adjectives. Reading them is enough to reveal the psalmist's skill as a superb poet and an artist.

9 *He will not be angry unto the end,  
neither will He be wrathful forever.*

Even though God is *long-suffering*, this does not mean that he never gets angry. If God never got angry with us, it would mean that He didn't love us. If all you ever did was to tolerate and condone what another person did, you would not be doing that person a favor. There are times when it is necessary to threaten, rebuke, punish, and correct. A God that never got angry would be a God without love; He would be like an unfeeling father who merely tolerates or simply ignores his children long enough until they're grown up and gone.

But even when God does grow angry, *He will not be angry unto the end.* He will not make sinful man drink the cup of His wrath to the dregs. Instead, He will deal with us with great delicacy and sensitivity. As soon as He sees even the smallest little improvement in the soul; the slightest turn in the direction of the light, His anger will immediately dissipate. God's punishment is never commensurate with the crime; it is not measured out by the standards of an impersonal law, or by the demands of abstract justice; it extends only so far as is needed for correction.

*Neither will He be wrathful forever.* God can be «angry» with an individual, but far worse than this is His anger at an entire nation when it has sinned and acted unjustly. Sinful nations, just like sinful individuals and communities, are visited by God's wrath. But even with these, God *will not be wrathful forever.* As soon as the people of Israel said «We have sinned», God's wrath ceased;

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and the moment they fell back into sin, God resumed His punishments. In this verse, then, the psalmist interweaves the history of his people with his own history, which remains as true for us as it was for them. I cannot separate myself from this story, for I cannot separate myself from the Church, for that would be to sever a living member from the body that gives it life (cf. 1 Cor 12:12).

10 *He has not requited us according to our transgressions,  
neither has He dealt with us according to our sins.*

Whatever God has done to us, or permitted to happen to us, was not *according to* the measure of *our transgressions*, but according to the measure of His love, and this is something that should fill us with joy.<sup>21</sup> Woe to us if God were to punish us according to our sins! The rainbow would be rubbed out from the sky (cf. Gen 9:12-13), and the human race would be obliterated by the force of a new cataclysm.

11 *For as high as heaven is from the earth,  
so greatly has He made His mercy to prevail  
for them that fear Him.*

21. See St. Kallistos Angelikoudis, *On Prayer* 26: «The humble man rejoices, but not on account of himself, for how can he rejoice when he continuously condemns himself as a sinner? Instead, he rejoices in the merciful God, Who is closer to him than his own breath, or to speak more clearly, Who creates in his heart and sets in motion waves of heavenly light and inexhaustible rivers of spiritual wonders, and all but says to him: *I am with you* (Jer 1:8). Since God has him for His friend, He reveals His mysteries to Him and fills him with joy, and then the words of David come to him and he says: *He has not requited us according to our transgressions, neither has he dealt with us according to our sins* (Ps 103:10)» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:315).

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12 *As far as the east is from the west,  
so far has He removed our iniquities from us.*

The psalmist now invokes new images and a new set of contrasts. He had previously made use of contrasts drawn from human life: birth and death, love and justice. Now the contrasts are drawn from the physical dimensions of space: heaven above and earth below, as one point of the compass is contrasted with another. It's like when a father asks his child: «How much do you love me?» And the child spreads out his arms and says: «This much and more!» The child's aim is to suggest a magnitude that has no limit, stretching out his arms to infinity. The psalmist is doing the same thing. «How much do You love us, O God?» «As much as heaven surpasses the earth». So high, so great, so incomparable is the love of God to *them that fear Him*.

The greatness, the magnitude, of God's love for us is proved by the fact that He forgives us. The forgiveness of *our iniquities* is the highest demonstration of God's love for us. What is an «iniquity»? It is an act of gross injustice and wickedness, a crime deserving of death. But our sentence has been commuted, for God *removed our iniquities from us*, forgave us our sins, and granted us life instead. How great is God's forgiveness? As great as the distance from east to west, in other words, the greatest distance imaginable, for God has scattered our sins to the four points of the compass. This is the greatness, the magnitude of God's love for us, the extent to which He forgives us.

13 *Like a father has compassion on his sons,  
so has the Lord had compassion on them that fear Him.*

In this verse, the psalmist expresses the depth of the bond uniting God with man. Among human beings, there is no stronger bond

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than that of parent and child. Just as parents love their children and make sacrifices for them, so too does God love *them that fear Him*. With the strongest and clearest comparison possible, the psalmist describes God's love and concern for mankind.

14 *For He knows of what we are made,  
He remembers that we are dust.*

The phrase *of what we are made* translates a single word (πλάσμα) meaning the material, the elements from which we have been created. And what material is this? The dust of the ground, which is blown about by the wind, inherently unstable, and which cannot stand on its own before God. And because God *knows of what we are made*, He does not reckon up all our sins, for He knows that we are creatures of dust.<sup>22</sup> The mud from which we have been fashioned is soaked with blood and tainted by sin. Our human clay has been molded by wickedness, deformed on the wheel of sin. What, then, can God expect from me? Nothing. Will He judge me according to the mud and the clay from which I have been formed? No. He will judge me according to His love, He will look upon us in the light *of what we are made*. He knows that, being vessels of clay, we are fragile, like *the pitcher that breaks at the fountain* and quickly returns to the dust (cf. Ecc 12:1).<sup>23</sup>

22. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *On St. Hesychios*: «The psalmist says, *He knows of what we are made* (Ps 103:14), which means, ‘You made me, O God, and so You know who I am. How then can you not understand me? I beg You, then, deliver me from my sins» (375-376).

23. See Ecclesiastes 12:1, 6-7: «Remember your Creator... before the pitcher is broken at the fountain, before the wheel runs broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit return to God who gave it». There is an intriguing interpretation of this passage in *The Catena of*

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*He remembers that we are dust.* Another version of this line takes the form of a plea: «Remember, O God, that we are dust». Is there anything less significant, or of less value, than dust? What can God expect from mere dust? Yet, if this dust were to be joined to divinity, everything would change.

That God «knows» *of what we are made*, and «remembers» *that we are dust* can also have another meaning. Rather than emphasize the *distance* between God and human beings, it can also highlight the close nature of their bond. God is the One Who created me, Who formed and fashioned me from the dust of the earth. He knew me and loved me even before I was born. He knows, He remembers me from the time that I was just a layer of dust. He has not forgotten that, before he breathed into me the spirit of life (cf. Gen 2:7), I was a clod of earth, a patch of mud, a lump of clay scooped from the ground that sat awkwardly on His potter's wheel. He was the one Who shaped and molded me in the womb of His hands, it was He Who designed all the details of my body. How, then, can He not love me?

When I learn that you've done something terrible, I want to condemn you. But when you tell me what the circumstances were, when you explain to me what sort of things led you to do what you did; when I learn about your problems, your struggles, the things that you've had to deal with in your life, my attitude changes and I enter into sympathy with you. Can you imagine, then, how I

*the Three Fathers*, which suggests that the well, with its revolving wheel and fragile pitcher of water, is a metaphor for human existence. Drawn up like an earthenware vessel from watery depths, the body comes into being through a concurrence of earthly elements, during which it receives the «divine in-breathing, that is, the rational soul» (Gen 2:7). But the 'wheel' of life turns, the rope slips, and the vessel is smashed, and so returns to the earth from which it was taken. At the same time, the soul is poured out and returns to its hidden, mysterious source» (CCSG 11:84; cf. PG 93:620; PG 98:1161).

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would feel about you if I knew you from the moment when you were born, or even before you were conceived? Then you would be even more beloved to me.

Do you see how powerfully the psalmist contrasts human nothingness with the greatness of the merciful God? The status of man as a creature of the earth enables us to understand the majesty of God, or rather it is the majesty and holiness of God that enables us to understand our own poverty.

Having presented us with contrasts drawn from human life and from the realm of space, the psalmist now makes use of contrasts drawn from the realm of time.

- 15 *As for man, his days are like the grass;  
he blossoms like a flower of the field;*  
16 *For when the wind passes over it, it is gone,  
and it will no longer know its place.*  
17 *But the mercy of the Lord is from age to age unto them that fear Him,  
and His righteousness is upon sons of sons;*

In these lines, the eternity of God stands in stark contrast to the fleeting nature of human existence. Human life is of limited duration, *but the mercy of the Lord is from age to age*. God's love is eternal, because God is eternal, and God is love. Man, on the other hand, is a creature of the moment; his love is weak, wavering, fickle, and often false. If we were to translate verse 15 literally, it would say: «Man, like grass, his days», and this absence of syntactical order expresses the confused and chaotic nature of our existence, through which we stumble broken and breathless.

*He blossoms like a flower of the field.* Who does not rejoice at the sight of a young person? It's like seeing the beginning of a glorious day, like a rising sun radiant with possibilities. But this rising

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sun, this lovely flower of youth, is but a *flower of the field*, and no sooner does it reach its meridian than it begins to wither and fade. The so-called best years of our life, when we are prospering and flourishing, when we were at the height of our powers, were nothing more than a fleeting moment, with no greater reality than that of a distant dream. Thus the psalmist says that the life of every human being is like a flower, *a flower of the field*. And what is the fate of such flowers?

*When the wind passes over it, it is gone.* When the wind blows, the petals of the poppy are scattered far and wide, and all that remains is a dark stem, which itself will soon succumb to the elements. The *wind passes over it*, it is broken and scattered, and there is no longer any sign that once, on this spot, a flower stood. In the morning you go for a stroll and you see a stretch of hillside covered with beautiful flowers. You walk by there again in the afternoon, but a strong wind has been blowing, and all the flowers are gone. You look closely at the hillside, but you can't be sure where exactly the flowers were before they were swept away by the wind.

The Hebrew says «And its place will no longer know it», or «His place will no longer know him». You see someone as a young man, and then you see him after he's spent five years drinking and carousing. His face is no longer the same, for each of his sins has left its mark there. You hardly recognize him, and you wonder if this is really him. The flower of youth fades so quickly that the people in the town where he was born may not be able to recognize him, and so «his place will no longer know him.

*But the mercy of the Lord is from age to age unto them that fear Him.* From the experience of human transience David is led to reflect on divine eternity. The contrast is strong, but by no means is it negative or pessimistic. David senses the love of God for human



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beings, and so his description of the human condition is immediately followed by the affirmation that the mercy of the Lord is forever. Though his life on earth is tragic, man will live. God's hands shall lovingly take up the dust of the earth, and the fleeting and the finite will be wedded to the eternal and the infinite. The life that ends in death will be given new life, and that which appeared to vanish forever shall reappear in eternity. Just as we await the appearance of *new heavens and a new earth* (2 Pet 3:13), so too do we await the advent of a new human being, a new mode of human existence, which will emerge through the life of the new creation, for God the creator *is still working, even in this present moment* (cf. Jn 5:17). God, as Father, never ceases to generate and create. If God were to cease generating and creating, He would cease to be the Father, and thus cease to be God, which is impossible.

The phrase *from age to age unto them that fear Him* does not refer merely to the life of a particular human being, neither is it limited to the succession of generations. Instead, it encompasses all time, including the endless ages before time itself, when the timeless God conceived within Himself the creation of humanity. And because God will never cease to exist, the human person will also exist *from age to age*, so closely bound together are divinity and humanity.

A moment ago, time was used as a metaphor. Now, however, we have entered the timeless dimension of eternity. We have, in other words, transcended time. The psalmist has led us across the bridge of time into the kingdom of God, which is God Himself. Our frail barks, which foundered in the darkness, have now reached the distant shore. The smoldering wick of human nature, of our dying earthly life, has been set ablaze by the light of the eternal kingdom of God.

*And His righteousness is upon sons of sons.* This is not the «righ-

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teousness» that we spoke of a moment ago, but rather the justification of man by God. In the end, God's righteousness will prevail over the injustice of man, and so man too will be justified, made righteous by God. The psalmist is speaking as a prophet, foretelling the final glory of all *those that fear God*. And so the love of God shall extend to *sons of sons*, that is, from one generation to the next, through all generations, recreating human nature in the womb of His love, so that righteousness, like great drops of rain, will flow down:

18 *Upon them that keep His covenant  
and remember to keep His commandments.*

God's righteousness extends to and embraces all those who are faithful to His words, who keep His commandments. The use of the infinitive —«to keep»— signifies the outcome, the result, the actual *keeping of the commandments*, which is the characteristic sign of those that love God.

In the next two verses, the psalmist utters the highest praise of God, a perfect doxology. God's love has coursed through the whole of human life; His righteousness has enabled humanity to enter the eternal kingdom. What else is left? What more could there possibly be? Only this: the vision of God on His throne.<sup>24</sup> In the final act, God will be revealed in all His power and majesty, and so the psalmist presents Him as seated upon His throne, glorified by all creation:

19 *The Lord has prepared His throne in heaven,  
and His kingdom rules over all.*

24. On the «throne of God», see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, chap. 11.

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To be sure, God *has prepared His throne in heaven*, and *His kingdom rules over all*. What «kingdom» is this? The one that was just now revealed to us, transcending the limits of time and space. God's kingdom is His eternal rule above and beyond all the rebellions and revolutions of the human soul. It is God's eternal truth, which topples false idols and false gods from their pedestals, reducing them to dust.

20 *Bless the Lord, all you His angels, mighty in strength,  
that perform His word,  
to hear the voice of His words;*

Once again, David turns his gaze to the heavens. Having considered man's earthly life, and having reflected on the eternity of the kingdom of heaven, the psalmist now lifts up his heart and mind, and, joining his voice to the heavenly choirs, speaks to God with boldness. This is not the brashness resulting from his lowly origins in the mud, but the freedom of speech derived from his destination in God's throne, which is the perfect justification, for it is the ceaseless, eternal love of God. In his ascent to the divine throne, the psalmist turns and speaks to the angels. «Though I am a creature of the earth», he tells them, «I exhort you, *the angels of the Lord*, to *bless the Lord*». He asks them to do what he himself has already done, for he began by saying *bless the Lord, O my soul*. And having begun at a moment in time, he now finds himself addressing beings that are beyond time, without bodily mass, for they are creatures of immaterial fire (cf. Ps 104:4).

21 *Bless the Lord, all you His hosts,  
His ministers that do His will;*

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«For how can I, a creature fashioned from the mud, bless the Lord? But you, *all His hosts*, glorify the Lord! All you who are *mighty in strength*, who are strong, not weakened by any bonds to the earth». He is speaking to one of the lower orders of angels, and calling upon them to signal those in the ranks above them, just as he had signaled to his own soul to praise the Lord. In this way, men and angels, heaven and earth, are united in a single, harmonious choir glorifying God.<sup>25</sup>

*His ministers that do His will.* «You archangels, who every day execute the will of God; who at every moment extend an open ear to the voice of God, *to hear the voice of His words*, who wait upon His every gesture: glorify the Lord».

22 *Bless the Lord, all you His works,  
in every place of His dominion.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul!*

25. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.117: «*Praise Him with well sounding cymbals* (Ps 150:5). I take this to mean the union of our nature with the angels. For such a combination, I mean of the human and the angelic, will produce that sweet sound of thanksgiving through their meeting with one another. And through and with one another they will sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God for His love of humanity, which will be heard throughout the universe. This is indicated in the psalm by the coming together of *cymbal* with *cymbal*. The supernatural nature of the angels is one *cymbal*, and the rational creation consisting of mankind is the other. But sin separated the one from the other. Whenever, then, the mercy of God again unites the two with one another, then what comes about from the two will cause praise to resound, as the great apostle says: *Every tongue shall confess, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father* (Phil 2:11)» (trans. R. Heine, 121).

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Having exhorted the angels to offer a doxology, he exhorts all creation to praise the Lord. Running through creation in his mind, the psalmist calls upon all things – physical and spiritual, animate and inanimate, *in every place of His dominion* – to bless the Lord. *In every place* where God exists – and there is no place where God is not present – all things are exhorted to praise the Lord.<sup>26</sup> The doxology closes with a repetition of the first line, so that the end is just like the beginning.<sup>27</sup> «And you, my soul, be exalted; give yourself entirely over to an act of perfect praise. Become like a stringed instrument resounding with the praises of God, whose music never ceases, but soars upward and is lost in the measureless heights of the kingdom of God. Lose yourself in the infinity of God; be united to God.

Psalm 103 is so simple and straightforward, yet one could hardly compose a more beautiful poem, or paint a more beautiful picture, or produce a clearer image of God's presence and activity. This psalm is surely a work of David's maturity, for it exhibits all the wisdom and insight that comes from long experience. All of his struggles, his triumphs and failures, his endless spiritual wrestling, all his efforts to win God, are expressed in this psalm, with its rich

26. Compare St. Nikitas Stethatos, *On the Practice of the Virtues* 72: «I have heard people say that one cannot achieve a persistent state of virtue without retreating far into the desert, and I was amazed that they should think that the unconfined could be confined to a particular locality... the desert is in fact superfluous, since we can enter the kingdom simply through repentance and the strict keeping of God's commandments. Entry into the kingdom can occur, as David states, *in all places of His dominion*, for he says, *in all places of His dominion bless the Lord, O my soul* (Ps 103:22)» (*Philokalia* 3:97-98).

27. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm* 103: «Having encompassed all things in his doxology, he closes his psalm with the same verse that he used to open it, placing, as it were, a secure roof upon a solid foundation» (PG 23:1296).

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and flowing style. This psalm is like a piece of his soul, a part of the history of his people, a beautiful doxology, a *Gloria*, which rises up to God—not from anything false or affected—but from the deepest feelings of the human heart. Such a cry is an expression of the deep consciousness of sin, as well as a celebration of the Fatherhood of God and the adoption of sinful human existence.

I glorify God because I have understood that God is a Father and that I am his son and created; I glorify Him because I am nothing without Him, because He is my *beginning and my end* (cf. Rev 21:6). Psalm 103 is thus a hymn of love to God. The closed heaven opens, God is revealed, and I know that He is love (1 Jn 4:8), because this is something that I feel, that I sense deeply within myself.

I experience this revelation as the activity of grace within my heart. God is present to me as active and acting, and everything that I am experiencing is the result of His activities. At the same time, I come into full possession of my self; I acquire knowledge of myself as created and — with God's grace — as renewed and refashioned. Psalm 103, then, is an expression of the soul that knows itself to be both created and redeemed, for God has delivered it from corruption. This is the experience of every soul that has tasted redemption. A person who has not realized that he is a creature formed from the dust that is called to be a child of God, cannot be redeemed from sin, and thus cannot glorify God.

The psalmist's life and the history of his people are one, because the same God revealed Himself to both. The descent and revelation of God alone enables the union of human beings in history. The descent and revelation of God is the outpouring of God *on all flesh* (Jl 2:28). It is the divinization of human nature, the entrance of all creation into the Church. It is the assumption of human nature in the body of Christ, its ascension to the right

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hand of God, from which it fell away by the abuse of its free will. This nature, which was broken and scattered, has been brought together in the body of Christ in virtue of the outpouring of God, Who stooped down so that human nature might be raised up and united to Himself.<sup>28</sup>

The human person is truly alive only when God's love is present, and the same is true for communities of persons and entire nations. The proof of God's love is the gracious outpouring of that love, and thus the psalmist is not crowned with laurels or gold and precious stones taken from the ground, but with God's grace, with the *mercy and compassion* (Ps 103:4) that are the signs of God's active presence.

Standing before the altar, in the presence of God, the psalmist exhorts all creation to bless the creator. Having sought for God throughout his life, having shed so many tears, having lived through so many crises, not least those brought about by his double sin, he finds within himself the boldness to call on all creation. Despite his advanced age, he does not dwell on his many tears, his long nights spent kneeling, the troubles of his reign, the friends who betrayed him, the political rebellion organized by his son and closest advisor, not even his ordeal with Saul. He thinks about none of these things. He thinks only of God, Who appeared and revealed Himself to him.

It follows, then, that even if we choose to interpret this psalm, as many interpreters do, as referring to David's sin and subsequent illness, we see, in the final analysis, not a sick or sinful man, but the manifestation of God. *Where sin increased, God's grace abounded all the more* (Rom 5:20), because the Lord's *strength is*

28. Compare St. Maximos the Confessor, *Mystagogy* 1-2 (trans. G. Berthold, 186-188).

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*made known in weakness* (2 Cor 12:9). In the blackest night, a flash of lightning illuminates the horizon and lights up the sky. That is how God appears in our life; that is how He appears to those who struggle on the road of salvation. And though we see Him as light suddenly *appearing in the darkness* (Jn 1:5), He also comes to us gradually, by degrees. And He comes, not to occupy His fiery throne, but to enthrone Himself within my heart, to raise me up to His throne in the heavens, and make me one with Him. In the end, this is not the agony of man struggling to find God, but the agony of God struggling to find man; it is the pain of God running in love to those that abandoned Him, that were cut off from Him, that forgot about Him, that despised and rejected Him. Until the lost shall be found, until the finite be united with the infinite, God will be in agony.

Psalm 103 is a vision of God. Those who can't see God are spiritually blind, for God descends in all his majesty, while at the same time humbling Himself, in order to reach me before I die, to catch me before I fall into hell, to find me before I am lost forever. And when this happens, my song of praise will be complete, for I shall give glory to God as one risen from the dead and rising up to new life.



11  
Psalm 118 (117 LXX)

Alleluia.

- 1 *O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good,  
for His mercy endures forever.*
- 2 *Let the house of Israel now say that He is good,  
for His mercy endures forever.*
- 3 *Let the house of Aaron now say that He is good,  
for his mercy endures forever.*
- 4 *Let all those who fear the Lord now say that He is good,  
for his mercy endures forever.*
- 5 *From my affliction I called upon the Lord,  
and He heard me and brought me into a broad place.*
- 6 *The Lord is my helper,  
and I will not fear what man shall do to me.*
- 7 *The Lord is my helper,  
and I shall look down on my enemies.*
- 8 *It is better to trust in the Lord  
than to trust in man.*
- 9 *It is better to hope in the Lord  
than to hope in princes.*
- 10 *All the nations surrounded me,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*
- 11 *Surrounding me they surrounded me,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*
- 12 *They surrounded me like bees around a honeycomb,  
and they burst into flame like a fire among thorns,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*

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- 13 *I was pushed and overturned that I might fall,  
and the Lord was quick to help me.*
- 14 *The Lord is my strength and my song,  
and He is become my salvation.*
- 15 *The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous;  
the right hand of the Lord has wrought strength;*
- 16 *The right hand of the Lord has exalted me;  
the right hand of the Lord has wrought strength.*
- 17 *I shall not die, but live,  
and I shall declare the works of the Lord.*
- 18 *With chastisement has the Lord chastised me,  
but He has not given me over to death.*
- 19 *Open unto me the gates of righteousness;  
I will enter therein and give thanks unto the Lord.*
- 20 *This is the gate of the Lord;  
the righteous shall enter by means of it.*
- 21 *I will give thanks to You, for You have heard me  
and have become my salvation.*
- 22 *The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the head of the corner.*
- 23 *This is the Lord's doing,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.*
- 24 *This is the day that the Lord has made,  
let us be glad and rejoice in it.*
- 25 *O Lord, save now;  
O Lord, send now prosperity.*
- 26 *Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord;  
We have blessed you from the house of the Lord.*

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- 27 *God is the Lord and has appeared to us;  
ordain a feast with thick boughs,  
even unto the horns of the altar.*
- 28 *You are my God, and I will confess You;  
You are my God, and I will exalt You.  
I will give thanks to You, for You have heard me  
and have become my salvation*
- 29 *Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,  
His mercy endures forever.*

\*

\*      \*

Today I would like all of us to glorify God, Who has brought about great things in our lives. It now seems quite obvious that, for the past several years, He has been directing our steps toward the Holy Mountain, despite all the obstacles that stood in the way. One after another, great difficulties arose, but they broke like waves and dissolved into mist. And so here we are, gathered together, having only now been settled in the Garden of the Virgin.<sup>1</sup>

Without God's help, this would not have been possible, and so to Him we offer an «alleluia».<sup>2</sup> It was God Who chose us and called us to the monastic life, which is a life lived together with the Lord; a life that bestows on us the knowledge of God, which is the

1. In 1973, Elder Aimilianos and his monastic brotherhood left the Monastery of the Transfiguration in Meteora (in central Greece), and settled in the Monastery of Simonopetra on the Athonite peninsula, on which see *The Way of the Spirit*, xiv-xv.

2. This word, which will be commented on below, is a Hebrew imperative (*hallelujah*) that means «praise God».

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outpouring of God into our heart and mind. It is an illumination. Why is it that so many people do not know God, do not sense His presence, while we know Him and love Him and long for Him? Whatever the reasons, we can be sure of one thing: this cannot be counted as our own achievement, since we could never have done it on our own; it is something that God alone has done.

Today marks a turning point for us, and thus it is fitting that we sing alleluia. How many years have passed since the day we started out on our journey together! From the very beginning, your lives have been filled with difficult changes, with many ups and downs, with many hopes and desires. How often did unforeseen events become for one or another of you the cause of tears and weeping? And yet those tears, those difficulties, were offerings to God. Let us, then, praise and thank Him on this day of joyous new beginnings.

So that our gathering today might be a doxology offered to God, I have decided to speak about Psalm 118, which is one of the most beautiful psalms in the entire Psalter. It is also one of the most simple, and so there'll be no need to translate it, since I doubt that there's a single difficult or unusual word in it. It goes without saying that the all psalms are important to us. Yet Psalm 118 is especially important, since according to tradition it was the psalm sung by the Lord with His disciples at the Mystical Supper (cf. Mt 26:30), moments before He handed Himself over for the life of the world. It is, then, a preeminently Eucharistic psalm, a psalm of thanksgiving.

I also chose Psalm 118 because it's like a dance. When you read it, you feel your soul dance within you, and it does seem that the Jews often danced when they sang this psalm. In many Athonite churches, we see the image of *David dancing before the Ark*, which

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depicts his entry into Jerusalem, when *all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals* (2 Sam 6:5). Psalm 118 is thus a hymn of praise, an offering of thanksgiving, a leaping for joy in gratitude to God. It is, in other words, a particular disposition of the soul before God. When the psalmist glorifies God, he is not engaging in an act of imagination, neither is he parroting the formulas of conventional devotions. Instead, he finds himself in the presence of God, simultaneously seeing God and being seen by Him. The two are mutually present. You can't glorify someone whom you don't see, because a «doxology» is the turning of the soul directly to God. Thus, for someone to speak to God by means of this psalm, he or she must see God with the eyes of his soul.

«Alleluia» means «praise the Lord», that is, sing praises to the Lord Who is present. If this word is to leave our lips, we must first have seen God, and not simply seen Him, but have been betrothed to Him in a spiritual marriage. The praise of God is thus a nuptial hymn, a wedding song, chanted at the consummation of Christ's union with the soul. Thus a «doxology» is not merely a hymn we sing at certain times in church, but is the expression of the most intimate union that the purest intellect can conceive of between God and man.

Just as *no one can say «Jesus is the Lord» except by the Holy Spirit* (1 Cor 12:3), neither can we say «alleluia» if we have not been united to God, if our soul has not attained God. Only then can we sing «alleluia» with perfect understanding. Otherwise, all we're doing is mouthing a word in a foreign language. I can learn the meaning of this word by looking it up in a dictionary, but I will have no sense or feeling for its deeper significance.

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The word «alleluia» is a root whose flower is God, and through this root flows all the soul's enthusiasm, all of its energy. When the soul is united to God, it loses its individual power of perception and acquires experiential knowledge of God. The soul rises from the ground of this union as a true person, not confused with the person of the Lord, but united to Him. The historical event of God's union with human nature was the conception and birth of Christ. That was the moment when *the Word became flesh* (Jn 1:14), when He bowed down to embrace humanity, to endow it with His own life, making it similar to Himself.

It follows, then, that the psalms of thanksgiving are ultimately messianic, for they point to the descent of the Word of God and His union with the human soul, which in response cries «alleluia». And this is what we see in Psalm 118, a magnificent psalm that can only be sung with feeling and understanding by a soul united to God. The psalm's magnificence is concealed behind simple, straightforward language, although the words can't really be explained but instead must be understood in the light of personal experience.

- 1 *O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good,  
for His mercy endures forever.*
- 2 *Let the house of Israel now say that He is good,  
for His mercy endures forever.*
- 3 *Let the house of Aaron now say that He is good,  
for his mercy endures forever.*
- 4 *Let all those who fear the Lord now say that He is good,  
for his mercy endures forever.*

The repetition of the second half of each verse seemingly as a re-

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frain creates the impression that Psalm 118 was chanted antiphonally. The lead singer sang the first part of the verse, and the choir or congregation responded with the second part.

As for the historical context, a number of factors suggest that Psalm 118 was most probably written during the time of Nehemiah, when the Jews had returned from exile. We know that immediately upon their return to Jerusalem, the Jews set about doing two things: to rebuild their homes (along with a fortified wall) and to rebuild the Temple (cf. Neh 2:17). Even before they took care of their own homes, their chief concern was to raise up a house to God. In these efforts they met with many difficulties. Their enemies tore down what they had built, pillaged their settlements, and killed many of them, thereby bringing their work to naught. For a while it looked like their efforts would be in vain, but in the end they succeeded (Neh 4-6).

Many of the verses allude to these troubles, invoking images of «being surrounded by the nations» (verses 10-12), and the psalm as a whole praises God for «deliverance from affliction» (v. 5) and for the successful completion of work on the Temple. Verses 19-20, for example, which call for the «opening of the gates», along with the reference to the «cornerstone» (v. 22), to mention only the most obvious things, lend support to this interpretation. On the other hand, the call to «ordain a feast with thick boughs» (v. 27), together with the «voice of rejoicing in the tents of the righteous» (v. 15), would seem to point to the Feast of Booths, although I take this to be a reflection of the psalm's later use, since the primary occasion was more likely the rebuilding of the Temple, and in particular the celebrations surrounding its official opening. Afterwards, the psalm was modified and remained in use as a chant for the Feast of Booths, when the Jews built their

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temporary dwellings, and, having reflected on their distance from the Temple, warmed their hearts by singing Psalm 118.

*O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good.* What does «good» mean? It means that which is perfected in virtue, both in itself and with respect to others. This is why the New Testament says that *no one is good but God alone* (Mk 10:18).<sup>3</sup> The «good» denotes something that is unique, and thus «goodness» is a property of God, a reflection of His nature.<sup>4</sup> The good is that which all things

3. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On the Nature of the Good*: «The Hebrew Scriptures teach us in various ways that the good, and the nature of the good, is nothing other than God Himself, for it says, *O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good* (Ps 118:1), and this is precisely what we are taught in the New Testament, namely, that *no one is good but God alone* (Mk 10:18). And even Plato, in the *Timaeus*, says that «the creator is good, and the good can never have any envy of anything. And being free from envy, He desired that all things should be as like Himself as they could be... God desired that all things should be good and nothing bad (30A)» (PG 21:904-908); and Athenagoras, *Legatio* 26.2: «Because God is perfectly good, He is productive of good things» (PG 6:952).

4. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* 1.7: «God is Himself the Good, and His very nature is goodness... Those who know what is good by nature desire participation in it, and since this good has no limit, the participant's desire itself necessarily has no stopping place, but stretches out with the limitless» (trans. A. Malherbe & E. Ferguson, 31); and St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 4: «The sacred writers have preeminently set apart for God the name 'Good,' and they call the divine nature itself 'goodness.' This essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness to all things. Like the sun, it sends the rays of its undivided goodness to everything with the capacity to receive it... The Good returns all things to itself and gathers together whatever may be scattered, for it is the divine Source and unifier of the sum total of things. Each being looks to it as its source, agent of cohesion, and final goal. All things desire it; everything



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yearn for and desire, and it gives itself to them freely, for this is the nature of the good. There is nothing greater or higher for one to venerate, to praise, to *give thanks to*, than God, for God alone is absolute goodness and perfection.<sup>5</sup>

Yet there is something more, since the second half of the verse says, *for His mercy endures forever*. The «mercy» of God is the going out of God from Himself. The absolute God, Who alone exists, pours Himself out on those He has created. God's «mercy» is the grace of God, a descent of God's uncreated energy, and this is nothing other than God Himself. God is not some unapproachable power or force; not something simply outside and beyond creation, but something –indeed *someone*– that is poured out

sentient yearns to perceive it» (693BC, 700B); and St. Maximos the Confessor, *To Thalassios* 55 (PG 90:564D).

5. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm* 118: «With these words (i.e., Ps 118:1), the psalmist, having perceived God's benefactions to the world, and His constant love for mankind, which is revealed in all that He does, calls upon all to join in the communion of thanksgiving» (PG 55:328); and St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 1.78-79: «The psalmist sets forth in many ways the assistance which we received from God for the good, as if to multiply the occasions for giving thanks by his account of the good things and of the thanksgiving which abounds in God. For he begins immediately by saying, *give thanks unto the Lord for He is good* (here, citing Ps 106:1). The word 'thanks' (*ἐξομολογεῖσθε*) is to be understood in the sense of thanksgiving, not in the sense of confession. He exhorts us here to glorify God for His goodness alone, indicating that all the good and saving events which men have received from God have all been received on the basis of His grace and goodness. Although we offered no reason for the good, and on the contrary were totally in evil, He has not abandoned His own nature, but what He is, He also does. For it was not likely that He Who is good by nature would bring about something contrary to what He was by nature» (trans. R. Heine, 109-110).

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and flows into the depths of every soul. God continuously floods us with his mercy, His grace is always rushing toward us, like an abundance of light pouring through cracks and fissures in a wall.

Since this is who and what God is, the only fitting response is to break forth in praise and sing *O give thanks unto the Lord for He is good*. In the case of the psalm, who is being called on to give such thanks? As we are told in the next verse, it is *the house of Israel*.<sup>6</sup> «Give glory to God, you Israelites, who are celebrating the feast of Booths, who are celebrating the rebuilding of the Temple, who have come here to worship the Lord. All of you now say al-leluia, *for the Lord is good*, since He alone enters into you and fills you with life.

*Let the house of Aaron now say that He is good*. The psalmist presents us with the houses of Israel and Aaron ascending to the temple, the very sight of which causes the people to sing praises to God. They are especially moved at the sight of the priests employed in the service of the temple, for living in a foreign country they have neither temple nor priesthood. And so the *house of Aaron* is called upon, since Aaron was the high priest (cf. Ex 28-29), and those of his «house» are priests; these are called upon to give thanks to the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

6. Compare St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 118*: «What do you mean, O prophet, by calling on the *house of Israel to give thanks to the Lord* (Ps 118:2)? Do you mean the Israel that was enslaved under the Egyptians, that suffered myriad sorrows in Palestine, that endured a thousand exiles and captivities, and was scattered to the four corners of the earth? Yes, he says, for they are witnesses of God's good things, for on account of what they suffered, they received many blessings and benefits» (PG 55:328).

7. Modern interpreters hold that, as is the case with Psalm 115, the repeated formula reflects a liturgical practice involving three different groups – Israel,

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*Let all those who fear the Lord now say that He is good. Who are those who fear the Lord? They are non-Jews, gentiles, who had acquired faith in the law and in the mission of Israel, and who were granted a place within the order of worship. Thus we have a call which, directed to specific groups of individuals, may be taken altogether as a universal exhortation to the worship of God. The cry of «alleluia» is common to all those who ascend to the Temple, who rise up to offer praise to God.*

*5 From my affliction I called upon the Lord,  
and He heard me and brought me into a broad place.*

In the first four verses, we saw how God descends and is united with the soul, an experience expressed through the cry of «alleluia» in response to God's «goodness» and «mercy». In this verse, we see the same experience, the same mystical marriage of the soul to God, from the human point of view, which accounts for the introduction of the word «affliction». What does «affliction» mean here? It means to be under pressure, to feel tremendous stress, as if the weight of the world had fallen on you, as if some unbearable force was crushing your heart. It is natural to consider such a feeling as something negative, as something to be avoided, or to pretend that we are the kind of people who are not affected by such things. However, the experience of affliction is at the center of the life of every soul; it is part of the soul's daily experience.

Every day, everyone around you is undergoing a kind of mar-

the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord – that are here formally called upon (perhaps by a chorus leader), to sing the refrain «for his mercy endures forever».

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tyrdom. It's impossible to find someone who is not experiencing some form of affliction. You and I may be close, we may know each other well, yet I may be completely unaware that you are suffering; I may have no idea that every day you undergo a kind of martyrdom. And this works both ways, for neither do you know anything about my sufferings. Each soul has its mysteries that no one else can ever know. This is why each of us thinks that he or she alone suffers, and that no one else has any problems, or at least none that can compare to our own. This is why, speaking humanly, we say that «God has abandoned me», but we should know that it is precisely here, in this anti-theological turn, that we make a tremendous mistake, for these words are a self-consoling lie that we tell ourselves as we descend into the whirlpool of self-pity.

The truth is that afflictions are not the signs of God's absence or abandonment but rather of His presence. Afflictions are like the kneading of the dough in the making of the bread. They are the preparations for the mystical marriage, and without them the soul is left unformed, cold, and alone. It is affliction alone that can tear us away from our isolated, individual existence and transform us into something much more whole and open. Surrounded by the self-consoling dreams and delusions of my ego, I am not able to perceive reality, let alone to know God. But when these fantasies are swept away by my afflictions, then I begin to call and cry out to God. A man who does not experience afflictions becomes an egotist, incapable of loving God.

*From my affliction* – or «in» my affliction, according to another version of the text – *I called upon the Lord, and He heard me and brought me into a broad place.* It was while I was in the midst of my afflictions that I remembered the Lord, and so I cried out to Him, and in response he transformed the narrowness of my heart

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into a broad place.<sup>8</sup> Instead of saying, «in my affliction I called upon the Lord, and He took my affliction away», the psalmist says «He brought me into a broad place». Does this mean, then, that the Lord did *not* take his affliction away? Of course not, for he opened my heart and enlarged my soul and so enabled me to accept suffering, and it is this which prevents me from feeling pain. He taught me the right way to look at my afflictions, and how to find joy and happiness in my pain. He taught me the secret of happiness. He taught me that the acceptance of my affliction is what best enables me to call out and cry to Him.<sup>9</sup>

He taught me how to live in this «broad place», with an open heart that is able to contain all things. My heart has become like a vast reservoir: no matter how much water you pour into it, you'll never be able to fill it, and no amount of troubles or afflictions can overcome me, since God alone can fill my heart. I called out to God in my affliction, and what did He do? He opened my heart, He made it so large, so wide, that now it can contain God Himself. Before, the littlest thing was enough to drown me, but no longer, for my afflictions proved to be but a preparation to receive God.

8. See St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 118*: «Do you see God's goodness and His love for mankind? The psalmist did not say that he was 'worthy' of God's help, or that he had done anything to deserve it, but simply that he *called upon the Lord* (Ps 118:5), and thus his prayer alone was sufficient to save him from his troubles» (PG 55:330).

9. Compare St. Athanasios of Alexandria, *On Psalm 118*: «This psalm teaches us two things. First, that those who draw near to God in faith must do so through various afflictions, just as it says: *My son, if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for temptations* (Sir 2:1). Second, that when we are afflicted, we are to call on no one else but the Lord, Who can transform our affliction into a broad place (Ps 118:5), for it is by means of great labors and sufferings that we receive great rewards» (PG 27:476).

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*In affliction I called upon the Lord.* In Psalm 118, the affliction in question is the pain of the soul, the suffering of a nation, living far away from its divinely ordained center of worship, far away from Jerusalem. «Affliction» is thus the feeling of being deprived of God, the feeling of being cast off and living in a foreign land; it is the soul's perception that human life is a vain, meaningless affair, and that true life and true meaning are found only in union with God.

Calling out to God presupposes the soul's prior perception of a kind of lack or need. This perception is experienced as pain, but it is equally a birth pang, for it is the initial movement of the soul that longs to be united to God. Such a soul calls out to God from deep within itself, for it knows that without God it will dissolve into nothingness and be lost forever. In the midst of my affliction, with my soul fainting away and with my heart broken into a thousand pieces, *I called upon the Lord*. From my life of wretched slavery to sin, I called out to God, Who alone can release me from my bonds. Lost within darkness, I called out to the Light. Caught within the jaws of death, in the lips of a whirlpool sucking me down to hell, I called out to the One Who is my Resurrection and my Life. I cried out, praying that my descent into the abyss might become a rising; that my nakedness might be covered, *for all who have been baptized in Christ have been clothed in Christ* (Gal 3:27). But how can I be clothed if I don't even know that I am naked? How can I even begin to move in the direction of the light when I have no idea that I'm living in darkness? How can I desire to be united with God when I have no sense of His presence, or even His absence? But when, in my affliction, I call out to Him, He hears me, He broadens my heart, giving me peace, and joy, and the ability to be united to Him.

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God is the fountain of all existence, the source of all goodness, and He continually pours Himself out for the life of the world. Yet the fullness of God's life can only enter into a person who has understood his own emptiness, who realizes that in and of himself he has no existence, no goodness. This realization constitutes his possibility, his capacity for receiving God. Union with God, then, begins with the perception of a lack, of an absence, of an emptiness within us, which marks the beginning of authentic self-knowledge. This, in turn, leads to the «calling out» of which the psalmist speaks, followed by the «broadening» of the heart. If I have not yet had this experience, then I should know that I am far from God, far from union with Him, and far from being able to say «alleluia». But the psalmist, insofar as his heart has now been brought to a broad, open place, cries out:

6 *The Lord is my helper,  
and I will not fear what man shall do to me.*

Historically speaking, these words refer to God's help in leading the people out of captivity and rebuilding the Temple and its surrounding walls. In terms of the psalm's spiritual meaning, they refer to an inner experience. To the extent that I am afflicted for God's sake, to the extent that I experience pain for God, then God will come to me personally and grant me that which I desire. This is God's promise, for He is *my helper*.<sup>10</sup>

10. This is the psalm verse that St. Antony invoked in order to repel the devil from his door, when the latter appeared to him in the form of a small black boy (*The Life of Antony* 6.4; ACW 10:24); cf. *The Life of Barlaam and Ioasaph*: «The devil raised a great dust-cloud of thoughts in his mind, exactly as has been recorded of Antony the Great, and often appeared to him

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*And I will not fear what man shall do to me.* I am not afraid of what people might do to me, even though I am naked and defenseless. It doesn't matter that today I am but a bruised reed blown about by powerful winds; it doesn't matter that soon I will be broken and cast down into the mud (cf. Mt 11:7), for tomorrow I shall rise up and worship God. It doesn't matter if today I am attacked, slandered, reviled, and humiliated, for tomorrow I will be exalted. Let my enemies do as they please. It means nothing to me, for I have God as my helper. And so he repeats:

*7 The Lord is my helper,  
and I shall look down on my enemies.*

«The Lord, I say again, is my helper, and I shall look down on my enemies». Why does he say «look down»? Because now his enemies are dead, sprawled out on the ground around his feet, and thus he «looks down» on them. This reminds us of Psalm 45, which is a prophecy of Christ's marriage to the Church, an even this is preceded by a victorious battle, in which Christ *rides forth victoriously in His majesty... His arrows are sharp, and His enemies fall under Him* (cf. Ps 45:4-5). United to God, riding alongside Him in His fiery chariot, I will share in His victory *and shall look down on my enemies*. It follows naturally from this that we should not trust in men, but only in God, and so he says:

as black, for such he is, or with a drawn sword, or in the shapes of various beasts, or as an adder or a basilisk, but Ioasaph made the Most High God his refuge, and said, *the Lord is my helper, and I shall look down on my enemies* (Ps 118:7), for I shall *tread upon the adder and the basilisk* (Ps 92:13)» (LCL 34:570-571).



PSALM ONE HUNDREND EIGHTEEN

8 *It is better to trust in the Lord  
than to trust in man.*

9 *It is better to hope in the Lord  
than to hope in princes.*

The second verse repeats the meaning of the first in what is a classical example of «parallelism», which is a distinctive feature of Hebrew poetry. More precisely, it is what is known as a «climactic» parallelism, since the second verse does not simply repeat the first verse but carries forward and amplifies its meaning. The basic idea is clear: put your trust in the Lord, and not in a man. Whoever looks to another human being for the hope of his salvation has broken the first two commandments, for he has abandoned the worship of God for an idol (cf. Ex 20:3-4). Whoever looks to princes and other leaders for victory will be disappointed. They may win the occasional battle, but *in gaining the world they lose their souls* (cf. Mt 8:36). Therefore we place our hope for victory, *not in horses and armies, but in calling upon the name of the Lord our God* (cf. Ps 20:7).<sup>11</sup>

In the first of these two verses, the word «trust» does not so

11. See St. John Chrysostom, *On Psalm 118*: «When he says it is ‘better’ to trust in the Lord than to trust in man (Ps 118: 8), he does not mean this by way of any comparison, for there is none. This is simply the habit of Scripture, which makes use of such figures of speech as an accomodation to our weakness, which is why Jeremiah says *cursed is the man who trusts in man* (Jer 17:1), for in truth there is nothing more wretched, nothing so degrading and foolish than to place your trust in another person» (PG 55:321). See also Evagrius, *On Psalm 118*: «When using the word ‘man,’ Scripture often means ‘the devil,’ as when it says *a hostile man* (ἐχθρὸς ἄνθρωπος) *has sown tares in the field* (Mt 13:25)» (BE11EΣ 80:249).

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much emphasize «trustworthiness» as a kind of quality or attribute, but rather the sense of dependency that is often associated with it. My trust in God, my faith in Him, creates within me a natural dependence on Him; it places me in subjection to Him, for I am His servant. The notion of «hope», however, which is introduced in the second verse, adds yet another layer of meaning, namely, my relation to God, my dependence on Him, and my subjection to Him, are all encompassed by the experience of «hope».

In Greek the words for «trust» and «to have faith in» are the same (*πίστις, πιστεύω*), and so Paul tells us that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen* (Heb 11:1). That which does not yet exist, which has not yet reached its completion and perfection, is for me already a living reality. I depend on the Lord and I am subject to Him, because with the eyes of my soul I see even now my glory, my majesty. I see the consummation of my marriage to God already shining, as it were, on the tokens of betrothal that He has given me. The things that I hope for are necessarily in the future, yet I am already experiencing them as if they were present, because now I live my life in a manner that unites the present with the future. My life, my entire being, has already begun to share in God's coming kingdom. I live, in a sense, as if I had already died and been resurrected. Past, present, and future no longer mean the same thing to me, because I have been drawn into the life of God, Who is beyond time.

Do you understand now what it means to «trust» and «hope» in the Lord? Wake up, then, and get moving. Make haste, and enter the wedding hall, where a place has been set for you. Do not decline the invitation, do not shun marriage (cf. Mt 22:2-5). What does «marriage» mean? What does it mean to be «married»?

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It means to surrender your life, to give yourself over to the other; it means to grow in likeness to the other. Be annihilated, then, so that you may grow in likeness to God. And let all the things of this world likewise be annihilated, so that for you there remains only God.

The Book of Psalms is not a collection of words. It is not a series of phrases strung together in verses and couplets. Instead, it is a revelation —the revelatory activity— of God. Every verse is the manifestation of a new image, like a picture projected on a screen, to which successive images are joined, each adding something distinctive but nonetheless an organic part of the larger meaning.

- 10 *All the nations surrounded me,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*
- 11 *Surrounding me they surrounded me,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*

Here again we have two parallel lines, which extend into a third line, where the meaning is carried forward and expanded.

- 12 *They surrounded me like bees around a honeycomb,  
and they burst into flame like a fire among thorns,  
and by the name of the Lord I warded them off.*

The first part of each line speaks of being «surrounded by the nations», whereas the second part speaks of how the nations were repelled «by the name of the Lord».

*All the nations surrounded me.* When was Israel «surrounded» by all the nations? The answer is «always», since the use of the past tense —«surrounded»— signifies not a particular historical moment

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but rather a general condition. From the time of their origin as a nation, the people of Israel have been surrounded and attacked by hostile armies, which sometimes slew them on the spot, or at other times dragged them away into exile. And, now that they are struggling to rebuild their Temple, they continue find themselves under attack. This may be in fact a reference to the Samaritans, traditional enemies of the Jews, and so *Jews have no dealings with Samaritans* (Jn 4:9). The Ammonites — always so cunning and dangerous — were also the enemies of Israel (cf. Jg 3:13; 1 Sam 11:1).

*All the nations surround me.* They sought to prevent my union with God, to prevent my mystical union with Him. And *I warded them off*, not because they were my enemies, but because they were the enemies of God, and so I defeated them, not by my own powers, but *by the name of the Lord*.<sup>12</sup>

The trust of the Israelites in God is revealed by their reliance on the divine name. They were the only people who believed in the true God. All the other nations had either forgotten God or never knew Him at all, but Israel called upon His name. Through the recollection and invocation of His name, God was a living reality in Israel. He was not a vague, divine power, but a distinctly personal God Whose name was the bearer of His presence.

When I «call upon the name of the Lord», it means that the Lord is present to me. To speak His name is to speak to Him, to converse with Him, which means that I welcome Him into my life, I receive His presence, I am united to Him. And this is an activity of my heart, which keeps God in remembrance and so apprehends Him. The recollection of God in the heart and the invocation of

12. This is yet another psalm verse associated with St. Antony, who was overheard by his friends singing it inside his cell (*The Life of Antony* 13.7; ACW 10:31).

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His name is union with God, it is the zenith of spiritual life. In this psalm verse, and in many other passages of the Old Testament, we see glimmers of mystical experience, a rudimentary form of the Prayer of the Heart, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the heart, *Who bears witness with our spirit when we cry out, «Abba! Father!»* (cf. Rom 8:15-16). And this is God incarnate within me, for *the kingdom of God is within us* (Lk 17:21), within our heart.

*And by the name of the Lord I warded them off.* Their enemies attacked them with all kinds of weapons, and the Jews met them with weapons of their own, but victory was theirs only to the extent that they trusted in God, only to the extent that they called upon His name.

The Greek says *I warded them off*, but the Hebrew says «I broke them into pieces», which is much more expressive.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that a warrior takes a sword and cuts his opponent into pieces, so too does the faithful invocation of the name of the Lord utterly obliterate all our cares and troubles. The final destruction of the enemy occurs only by the power of the name of the Lord, and the final victory of the human heart is found only in the peace that God grants us after such a conflict has been concluded. The psalm's description of historical events, fraught with battles and wars, is simultaneously the expression of spiritual struggle and mystical experience.

*Surrounding me they surrounded me.* Here the redundancy in the language is meant to express the extreme stress; the small, stifling corner into which the Israelites had been pushed by their

13. The exact meaning of the Hebrew verb *amilam* is uncertain, and has been translated as «I cut them down», or «I cut them off», and even as «I circumcise them», derived from the root *mol*, which in a different conjugation means «to circumcise».

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enemies. There was no escape, and all hope seemed lost. But it is when we reach the absolute dead end that we call out to God and He hears us. The same redundancy, the same repetition, also conveys the sense of being surrounded over a long period of time, of being continually under attack. And this too is the experience of the spiritual person, for his constant struggles are the foundation of his ongoing progress in the spiritual life. Until we reach out to heaven, our life will be a relentless battle. Afflictions will never cease, but God gives us the kind of heart we need, not simply to withstand them, but to profit by them. Like a city under perpetual siege, the human heart will always be surrounded and under attack, but it will always have God as its defender.

The intensity of these assaults is illustrated by the image of hungry bees, which dart about in their mad desire to plunder and devour. And so the enemies of Israel attack with a degree of intensity and violence that is a veritable lust for blood. Whereas the Greek says *they burst into flame like a fire among thorns*, the Hebrew says «they burned out like a fire among thorns». The rage of the enemy was like a great fire that burst forth on a pile of dry kindling. But it was *only* a pile of kindling, and so the fire burnt out quickly, consumed and extinguished by its own impotent force. In the same way, our afflictions seem so great, they break forth and rage against us, but they are without substance, and as soon as they prompt us to call upon the name of the Lord, they are reduced to a pile of smoking ashes.<sup>14</sup>

14. Compare St. Theodore the Great Ascetic, *A Century of Spiritual Texts* 53: «Seek out places which are secluded and far from the world. And even if there is a scarcity of essentials in the place you choose, do not be afraid. If your enemies should *surround you like bees* (Ps 118:12), or pernicious wasps, assaulting you and disturbing you with all kinds of thoughts, do not be scared, do not listen to them, and do not withdraw from the struggle» (*Philokalia* 2:24).

13 *I was pushed and overturned that I might fall,  
and the Lord was quick to help me.*

This verse likewise describes the power and malignancy of the enemy, as well as the terrible experience of the soul in danger of falling, tottering on the brink of life and death. Yet to the extent that the soul perceives the enemy threat, so too does it apprehend the presence of God. With simple words this verse effectively describes a moment in the life of Israel and a moment in the life of the soul. Just when you thought things were fine, when you thought you had obtained some kind of victory, so that now you could relax a little and take it easy, at that very moment trouble strikes like a bolt of lightning; a sudden illness and the threat of death knock you off balance, events spin out of control, spinning you round and round, and you feel as if you've been given a violent shove, and are now desperately struggling to right yourself as you stumble into the abyss.

In human life nothing is certain, nothing is permanent. Troubles are forever hatching, breeding like a swarm of angry wasps, and in the blink of an eye your whole life can change. When you've entered paradise and hear the gates close behind you, *then* you can feel safe. But until then, our life will be an endless struggle, for the higher we climb, the greater the danger of a fall.

*And the Lord was quick to help me.* Yes, the Lord «was» quick to help, but I know that He is and always will be quick to help me. This is the aorist form of the verb, which, as we have seen, expresses the abiding characteristic of a particular experience. God never abandons us, but instead seizes us and snatches us away before the sword of the enemy can strike us. And even when I've been

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pushed, when I'm in the midst of falling, just as I've slipped into the abyss, He comes and rescues me. All that I have is my sense of purpose, my «affliction», and my «calling out» in that affliction. My affliction is my asceticism, it is my practice, my way of life, something that I offer to God. This is my sense of purpose, my will – or at least my wish – to struggle and endure affliction, for this is the cry of my heart. All the rest belongs to God; I can do no more. But because I have given myself to Him, because I have surrendered myself to Him, I have no fear. I'm on my way to heaven.

We said a moment ago that in this life there is no hope. Does this mean, then, that we are condemned to a life of hopelessness? No. The experience of hopelessness is but the first step that one reaches on the ladder of spiritual life: a sense of hopelessness in oneself and in all the things of the world. I arrive at a state in which I am a stranger to all hope. I am alone, without moorings, without a ray of hope, with no light to lead me to any kind of safe harbor. The only thing that exists for me is God. It goes without saying that this kind of «hopelessness» is not the expression of a psychological problem or even a sign of human weakness. It is something positive and beneficial, since this kind of hopelessness is in fact hope in God, just as dispassion is an intense passion for God. And so hopelessness is the complete surrender of myself to God. Just as someone can be violently pushed in a certain direction, hopelessness pushes me in the direction of God, leading me to union with Him. To be sure, this is not «hopelessness» in the ordinary sense of the word, which is really despair, and that is the greatest sin. Despair leads to nothing, creates nothing, sustains nothing. It's like being locked in a vicious cycle of sin, habituated into some pattern of behavior that you can't seem to shake, despite all your efforts, and so you stop struggling because you say



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«it's hopeless». That is not the kind of hopelessness we're talking about here. That's the devil talking, and the confused thoughts of a soul disfigured by the passions.

True hopelessness is a continual emptying of the self so that it might be filled by God. True hopelessness is something dynamic, something which advances and progresses, just like faith. It is not something static. True hopelessness is continual knowledge of the self that produces continual knowledge of God. Hopelessness is the feeling that everything around you is false, unreal, illusory, and so it makes you want to clutch on to something for support. Some people will grasp on to their ego, their sense of self, or their reputation, or their wealth, or their education. Others will grasp onto God. And this grasping begins from the moment you yourself are grasped by God and find hope in Him. Then it will become evident to you that the loss of hope, the experience of hopelessness, is in fact a gift from God.



12  
Psalm 77 (LXX 76)

For the end. A psalm of Asaph for Jeduthun.

- 2 *With my voice I cried to the Lord,  
with my voice to God, and He was attentive to me.*
- 3 *In the day of my affliction I sought God,  
with my hands, at night, before Him, and I was not deceived;  
my soul refused to be comforted.*
- 4 *I remembered God and was glad;  
I pondered, and my spirit became discouraged.           selah*
- 5 *My eyes were preoccupied with night watches;  
I was troubled and did not speak.*
- 6 *I considered days of old,  
and I remembered the years of ages past and I meditated.*
- 7 *At night I pondered in my heart,  
and my spirit probed diligently:*
- 8 *«Will the Lord spurn forever  
and no longer continue to be well pleased?*
- 9 *Or will He completely cut off His mercy?  
Has He brought an end to His word  
from generation to generation?*
- 10 *Or will God forget to be compassionate?  
Or will He in His anger shut up His compassion?           selah*
- 11 *And I said, «Now I have begun:  
this change has been brought about by the right hand  
of the Most High!»*
- 12 *I remembered the works of the Lord,  
for I will remember Your wonders from the beginning.*

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- 13 *And I will meditate on all Your works,  
and I shall ponder Your ways.*
- 14 *O God, in the Holy Place is Your way.  
What god is great as our God?*
- 15 *You are the God Who works wonders;  
You made known Your power among the peoples;*
- 16 *You redeemed Your people with Your arm,  
the sons of Jacob and Joseph.* selah
- 17 *Waters saw You, O God;  
waters saw You, and they were afraid,  
and the depths were afraid.*
- 18 *Great was the sound of the waters;  
the clouds gave forth a voice,  
for Your arrows passed through them;*
- 19 *The voice of Your thunder is in the whirling of the clouds;  
Your bolts of lightning illumined the earth;  
the earth shook and was set atremble.*
- 20 *Your way is in the sea,  
and Your paths in many waters,  
and Your footprints shall not be known.*
- 21 *You guided Your people like sheep  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

\*

\*      \*

We will not go into all the details of the title of this psalm, most of which are familiar to us from previous discussions. The psalm is «for Jeduthun» because it was given to him for its musical setting and performance. Jeduthen is mentioned in 1 Chronicles 25:1, where he is associated with Asaph and Haiman, whose sons,

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it says, *should prophecy with harps, lutes, and cymbals*. These three men were the leading liturgical musicians in the time of David (although the name of Ethan sometimes appears in place of Jeduthun). David took a personal interest in liturgical music (cf. 1 Chr 23-26), and established a distinct style that his musicians followed closely. Like David, they understood the importance of music for worship, and devoted their entire lives to their craft, for the simple reason that the object of their praises was God Himself.

That a psalm by Asaph was to be performed by Jeduthen indicates that the psalm in question is one of great importance. At the same time, it tells us how we should approach the psalm. As we've said before, the psalms of Asaph are not concerned with historical events or other such matters. Rather, they are concerned with the search for God and the experience of His presence. Consequently, these psalms are songs of desire and longing, and are among the most spiritual works of the entire Old Testament.

In light of the psalm's contents, the phrase «for the end» refers to the conclusion of an agonizing struggle, the resolution of an arduous quest, which seemed like it would end in utter failure. However, contrary to all expectation, it resulted in the victory of the one who seemed defeated.

2 *With my voice I cried to the Lord,  
with my voice to God, and He was attentive to me.*

These words reveal a deep sense of sorrow, a feeling of pain, which is why many modern interpreters believe that Psalm 77 was written during a time of national crisis, when the Jewish people were under attack from the Assyrians or the Persians (cf. 2 Kgs 17:6; 2 Chron 36:17-20). According to this interpretation, Psalm 77 was written after the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, or after

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the Babylonian captivity of the Southern Kingdom, or perhaps immediately before it, when the Jews were under siege and confronting the very real possibility that they would soon lose everything. This fits well with the overall content of the psalm, and we may take it as part of the psalm's historical context.

Returning to the verse itself, I should say that it is not simply the expression of a particular feeling, but a kind of overture to the basic themes of the psalm. The psalmist cries out to the Lord because he is *searching* for the Lord, and this causes him sorrow and pain of spirit. When does our spirit experience sorrow? When does it feel pain? When it understands that something separates it from God; when it feels the *dividing wall* standing between itself and God (cf. Eph 2:14).<sup>1</sup> Every spiritual sorrow, every pain of separation from God, all the anguish and anxiety caused by this separation, constitute the «Babylonian captivity» of the soul. From such captivity the psalmist longs to be delivered, which means that he longs for the Lord, and this is why he tells us that with his whole being he *cried out to the Lord*.

The Hebrew says «My voice (goes) to God, for I cry out, so that He may hear me,» which presents us with a subtle but important difference. That the psalmist's voice «goes to God» does not refer to a particular moment when the psalmist audibly cried out to God, but is the expression of his whole life, his whole existence, as turned toward God. «I am like an arrow poised on a bow,» he's telling us, «aimed perpetually at God.» That this is a permanent condition is further emphasized by the verb, which is in the present tense: «My voice *goes* to God.» What is the «voice»? It is a reflection of the heart. It is an audible expression of whatever we have inside ourselves; an expression of the heart's contents. «All

1. On the «dividing wall,» see Elder Aimilianos, *The Way of the Spirit*, 2-3.

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my being, my entire existence, seeks nothing else but God. My life, and thus my voice, are completely turned toward God.»<sup>2</sup>

3 *In the day of my affliction I sought God,  
with my hands, at night, before Him, and I was not deceived;  
my soul refused to be comforted.*

This verse introduces a new layer of meaning, for it tells us that the psalmist is «afflicted,» a word which in Greek means feeling hemmed in on all sides, pressed down, crushed. «Whenever I was in pain; whenever I felt the crushing absence of God; whenever I felt the oppressive emptiness of my inner desolation, of my isolation, I sought for God.»<sup>3</sup>

*With my hands, at night, before Him, and I was not deceived.* The psalmist had «cried out» to the Lord, which was the expression, the externalization, of his inner life. Now, however, his cry becomes a prayer, an activity indicated by the lifting up of his hands, the raising of his palms toward God, a gesture which also represents the

2. See Evagrius, *On Psalm 77*: «Why does he say *to the Lord*? Because the voice of most people is not directed to God, but only the voice of the righteous man, when he prays» (BEΠΕΣ 80:133); Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 77*: «It says *He was attentive to me*, because I did not approach Him idly, but I prepared myself, I made myself worthy of His attention» (PG 23:888B); St. Athanasios, *On Psalm 77*: «With these words he teaches clearly that God is near to those who call on Him» (PG 27:345B).

3. Compare St. Athanasios, *On Psalm 77*: «So great was the affliction that surrounded my soul, that I not only sought after and prayed to You during the day, but I spent all my nights crying out to You, and this was not in vain, *for I was not deceived*» (PG 27:345BC). In the language of Psalms and the Bible more generally, the «night» often carries connotations of threatening chaos, danger, and vulnerability.

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movement of his soul. The psalmist's will to pray expresses itself in and through his body. Just as his voice had cried out, so too does his body speak, not because he is affecting a pious, external pose, but because something has naturally and spontaneously welled up within him. Yet the *lifting up of his hands* (cf. Ps 141:2) is not simply a blind physical reflex, but the conscious, personal expression of the will, the sign that the whole person is engaged by the search for God.<sup>4</sup>

«Whenever I was overcome by feelings of inner pain and emptiness, I had the great joy of knowing that I was sad precisely because God was missing from my life. As soon as I realized that, I cried out to Him, I raised my hands in prayer, and I was not disappointed, *I was not deceived.*»

*My soul refused to be comforted.* «During these difficult moments, I refused to accept any worldly comfort, any human consolation.» The search for God is not a search for comfort and consolation. The psalmist tells us that he did only one thing: he *raised his hands at night before God*. He says «before God,» which means «in the presence of God.» The psalmist is not struggling with bodily illness or any other kind of private pain; he is not troubled by his enemies, or agonizing over the fate of the nation. Instead, he is struggling with God, Whom he must conquer. This is why his hands are raised in prayer, for prayer is the arena in which we wrestle with God, the place where we struggle with Him, and this struggle is the center of the psalmist's entire life.

4. Compare Theodoret of Kyrrhos, *On Psam* 77: «Here he shows the manner in which the righteous pray, for they lift up their hands to God, and they do this in the tranquility of the night awaiting the response of God's love» (PG 80:1477A). The Hebrew word for the psalmist's outstretched hand is an unusual verb used for the pouring of liquids. As in Lamentations 3:49, it is probably meant to indicate a devotion that never subsides.



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The Hebrew again offers us its own accents: «At night my hands are outstretched and do not tire.» Here we see the psalmist as a man who seeks God at night, and who remains in prayer with his hands raised to God. Night is the time of prayer.<sup>5</sup> His *soul refuses to be comforted*, he has renounced and rejected all things, and now he seeks only God, for only God can help him. «I am not waiting for my troubles to come to an end, but for the wall between us to come falling down so that I might see Your light.»<sup>6</sup>

4 *I remembered God and was glad;*

*I pondered, and my spirit became discouraged.*                      selah

Here the Hebrew is very different: «I want to think of God, and I must moan, I want to ponder, and my spirit languishes.» These are the words of a fallen man; of someone who is not able to do anything based on his own strength or abilities. In this way, the Hebrew presents the psalmist as struggling in vain, for God remains an invisible presence, but nonetheless ready to intervene and help. The Septuagint version, which reflects a Greek mentality, from the outset frames the psalmist's struggle in light of the victory that will be his at the end. The Greek translator has been influenced by the outcome of the struggle, and thus he renders the verses as a series of steps leading to victory: first comes the cry of the heart; second the will and commitment to struggle; and third the standing before God, which occurs through the remem-

5. See above, Psalm 63:1 (chap. 1).

6. Compare St. Athanasios, *On Psalm 77*: «My soul has rejected all earthly consolations; I rejoiced only when I remembered God, for there is nothing else that can console or comfort us apart from the presence of God in the heart» (PG 27:345C).

brance and recollection of God. Influenced by the dynamics of spiritual experience, the Greek translator stresses that God, Who has promised to rescue and save the psalmist, will surely do so. Because God has promised to come, it's as if He's already there.<sup>7</sup>

*I remembered God and was glad.* «The mere thought of God, the simple remembrance of Him, filled me with joy. The only time I'm happy is when I think of God. Nothing else brings me joy, nothing else fills me like the remembrance of God does.» This verse describes the search for God and God's response. To remember God is to experience joy.<sup>8</sup>

*I pondered, and my spirit became discouraged.* If we read this verse in its historical context, we understand that the psalmist is «pondering» the captivity of Israel, along with all the pain and

7. The Greek consistently shifts the verb tense in this psalm so that prayer and the search for God are placed in the past, with the result that the hope for hearing expressed in the Hebrew appears already fulfilled. Here, in verse 4, aorists are used (and again in v. 12), so that the psalmist looks back at the situation of lament with a degree of temporal distance.

8. Compare St. Peter of Damascus, *On Joy*: «If a person is constantly mindful of God, he will rejoice as the psalmist says: *I remembered God and was glad* (Ps 77:3)» (*Philokalia* 3:261); St. Theoleptos of Philadelphia, *On Inner Work in Christ*: «Prayer is the mind's dialogue with God, in which words of petition are uttered with the intellect riveted wholly on God. For when the mind unceasingly repeats the name of the Lord and the intellect gives its full attention to the invocation of the divine name, the light of the knowledge of God overshadows the soul like a luminous cloud (cf. Ex 40:32). Concentrated recollection and remembrance of God is followed by love and joy, for *I remembered God*, it says, *and I rejoiced* (Ps 77:3)» (*Philokalia* 4:181); St. Symeon of Thessaloniki, *On Prayer*: «Prayer is the indwelling of Christ in the heart and the mind, for Christ comes to dwell within us when we remember Him, and this indwelling fills us with joy, as it is written: *I remembered God and was glad* (Ps 77:3)» (*Philokalia* [Gr] 5:60).

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anguish that this provokes within him. When he considers the multitude of enemy forces ready to capture Jerusalem, his spirit is «discouraged.» In the face of such overwhelming odds the spirit becomes weak, falters, and loses its natural powers.

When we consider this verse in light of the search for God, which characterizes the psalms by Asaph, we see another meaning. Both the «pondering» and the «discouragement» express the human experience of fear, doubt, and uncertainty. It's as if he were saying «I feel intimidated, upset, and exhausted; I feel like there is nothing in this world for me. Why? Because my life has been ruined by sin. I am useless, good for nothing. The situation is hopeless. Yet, if You, O Lord, would come; if You would grant me Your grace, Your mercy, then I would be redeemed from the wreckage of my life.»

The psalmist's expression of despair is followed by the musical interlude known as the «selah.» He has reached the limit of language; sin has made life empty and meaningless, and nothing more can be said. Into the gap opened up by the breakdown of language and meaning comes the sound of musical instruments. The musical interlude changes the atmosphere, and something occurs during this interval that allows the psalmist to move forward.

In other words, the «selah» has been inserted into the text, not by chance, but precisely where it was needed, for it signals an intervention by God. This is not a *deus ex machina*, but the advent of the living God Who promised to come and bring salvation precisely when it is needed.<sup>9</sup> This is why the Church Fathers say that the *selah* is an addition to the psalm made by the Holy Spirit, since it marks those places where the heart and intellect are opened up

9. On the *deus ex machina*, see above, chap. 8, n. 24.

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and illumined by God's grace. It is here, in other words, where the dividing wall of hostility (cf. Eph 2:14) is torn down and the soul is filled with divine light.<sup>10</sup> The wall is the human condition, with all its confused pondering and failure of courage; it is the painful acknowledgement that a limit has been reached, that no amount of human effort can free us from our captivity to sin.

In response to this acknowledgment, God makes His presence known, for now a space has been opened in which He may act. A stream of light touches the psalmist; he is struck by the waves of the Spirit. He must stop and listen; he must try to understand and communicate what the Spirit is telling him. The result is a change within the psalmist, a change of mind and heart, brought about by the power of the Spirit.

*5 My eyes were preoccupied with night watches;  
I was troubled and did not speak.*

On the historical level, the psalmist has been watching the night movements of the enemy troops; he sees them drawing near, posi-

<sup>10</sup> See St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms* 2.115: «If some illumination of the Holy Spirit occurred in the midst of David's prophesying, as the singing of the psalm was proceeding, he held his speech in check for a moment and let his understanding receive the knowledge of the thoughts which occurred to him from the divine illumination. It often happens that, if people who are conversing should suddenly hear a sound from somewhere, they stop and give their full attention to the sound, so that in the silence they may hear and know the meaning of the sound. In the same way, David submitted himself to the Spirit and stopped speaking, so that the *selah* is a teaching from the Spirit which occurs in a mysterious manner in the soul, when the attention given to this new thought impedes the continuity of the song» (trans. R. Heine, 157-158).

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tioned on a ridge opposite Jerusalem. On the level of the spirit, he has remained in prayer and vigilance all through the night. He has not closed his eyes. The watchmen have completed their shifts, been replaced by others, and gone to rest; he alone goes without sleep, he alone stays awake for God. The connection to the preceding verse is clearer in the Hebrew, since it is God Himself Who sustains the psalmist in his vigil, «You, O God,» he says, «held open my eyelids.» They eyes of man are weak, they cannot remain focused on God for very long, but what human nature could not accomplish was accomplished by God. Even Moses grew weary, and had to sit on the stone; neither could he keep his hands raised, and needed Aaron and Hur to prop them up (cf. Ex 17:12). Something similar is happening here.

6 *I considered days of old,  
and I remembered the years of ages past and I meditated.*

«What I *can* do, O God, is to consider that You have been present among us from ages past, and this gives me hope that You shall make Your presence known yet again.» History is important both in the life of the individual and in the collective memory of a people or a nation. History points to the presence of God, the activity of God, within historical experience. This is why the psalmist says *I remembered the years of ages past*. He pondered human existence from the very beginning, reflecting on God's tenderness to Adam and Eve, His dwelling with the patriarchs, and the liberation of the people from Egypt. He thought in particular about the crossing of the Red Sea, since this is an event that figures in all of the so-called «historical» psalms. It was on these things that he *meditated*, beginning from the very moment that the thought of «man» entered the mind of God.

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- 7 *At night I pondered in my heart,  
and my spirit probed diligently:*  
8 «*Will the Lord spurn forever  
and no longer continue to be well pleased?*

The psalmist lingers in the night, since this is the only suitable time to address God and to be addressed by Him. At night, therefore, he «pondered in his heart.» Why does he say «in his heart»? Because it was by means of his heart that he was joined to God. He also speaks of his spirit, by means of which he dug into the mystery of God, since here the word «probe» means to dig into the depth of something.<sup>11</sup> Only the spirit can understand and enter the depths of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:10). Verse 7 refers to experiences that the psalmist had at night, and which he later attempted to represent in poetical language, yet the experiences themselves remain beyond language. Experience is one thing, conceptualization in language is another.

«*Will the Lord spurn forever and no longer continue to be well pleased?*» The question is in fact a cry to the Lord, an entreaty that He will come and fill the heart of the psalmist. «Will You break with the past and no longer be active in our lives? Will You not be present with us as You were present to Adam, the patriarchs, and to Moses? I know that this cannot be: You will continue to care and provide for us, You will continue to be well pleased.»

We can see in these words the dawning of the light of Christ, in Whom the Father was «well pleased» (Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22).

11. Compare the sermon attributed to St. John Chrysostom: «Let us imitate the farmers, and with the fork of the Spirit let us dig into the depth of our heart, as it is written, *I pondered in my heart, and dug diligently into my spirit*» (ed. S. Haidacher, 1907, p. 355).

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All the sufferings endured by the Israelites were a preparation «for the end,» when they would receive Christ, the King of Glory (cf. 1 Co 2:8).

9 *Or will He completely cut off His mercy?  
Has He brought an end to His word  
from generation to generation?*

«It cannot be that ours is the last generation. Your mercy, which is from generation to generation, will surely be extended to us.»

10 *Or will God forget to be compassionate?  
Or will He in His anger shut up His compassion?* Selah

«Is it possible for God not to be compassionate? Is it possible for Him not to show mercy? He is compassion itself, mercy itself. He himself wants *mercy, and not sacrifice* (Mt 9:13). If God should somehow forget or refuse to show mercy, it would be a denial of His own being, of His own nature; it means He would enter into contradiction with Himself, and this cannot be. Neither can His anger seal up the fountain of His compassion. If wrath were to triumph over love, it would mean that God has rejected His own Self, or that He does not exist, or that He is dead. But this is impossible. The only alternative is that God will remember us; He will send down on us His compassion; He will respond to our desire.» What desire is this? To see Him, to have Him for our own. God will grant us the theophany, the vision of Himself, that we long for, and with this we arrive at the second «selah.»

As I said at the outset, Asaph was influenced by the spirit and experiences of David. The greatest of these experiences was of God's absence, after David had sinned (2 Sam 11:2-27; 12:13). David's

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experience of God's absence prompted him to build the Temple, so that God would always be present to him and the people (2 Sam 7:2). And so he attends to the various preparations, procuring the appropriate materials, establishing the site, but in the end he was not able to build a house for God (1 Kg 8:17-20). Thus he deeply felt the absence of God, both because of his sin, and because of his failure to build the Temple.

Asaph was himself filled with this feeling and this is why his psalms express the desire to be delivered from the sufferings caused by sin. He longs to be free of the division between *the law of the spirit and the law of sin* (cf. Rom 7:23); free of the duality between his deeper self and the spirit that resists God and struggles to break free from Him. This is why he seeks God and rejoices in His presence.

11 *And I said, «Now I have begun:  
this change has been brought about by the right hand  
of the Most High!»*

*And I said.* When? In the middle of the night, in the midst of his agony, he spoke of what God had revealed to him, of what God had given him. What did God give him? A mind with wisdom and understanding, and this is why says *now I have begun*, for it is only now that he begins to think clearly and with understanding. Did he arrive at this understanding on his own, as a result of his own efforts? No, for the wisdom he received was revealed to him by God. God appeared to him, and that was a revelation, but it doesn't mean that the psalmist ceases to be who he was. A man does not cease to feel pain because he has seen God. On the contrary, God's presence is often felt in the midst of great agony, in the midst of great pain, in moments of loss and failure, for *he who*



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would lose his life for My sake shall find it (Mt 16:25). Do we not die? And yet God's presence is experienced even in death.

*This change.* This is the change he was longing for, the liberation from his passions, you will say. But that's not the meaning here. To «change» means for me to contain God, to know Him, for God is knowledge. Now at last I have understood! What other sort of change could I possibly be interested in? Within me, the right hand of the Most High is at work; within me a miracle is taking place. I realize now that my suffering, my agony, my tragedy have all *been brought about by the right hand of the Most High*. We discover God in the midst of our difficulties, for this is how he is active in our life: why, then, would I want to be rid of them? They are the guide, the teacher, the ladder that leads me to God.<sup>12</sup>

When we consider the anguish of the person who desire and seeks God, who feels deeply God's absence, the same holds true. My anguish and my searching are themselves the presence of God in my life. To search for God means that I have already found Him, for God is already present in my searching.<sup>13</sup> That I experi-

12. Compare Elder Aimilianos, *Stages in the Spiritual Life*: «Now he shall cry out: *«Now I have begun: this change has been brought about by the right hand of the Most High!»* for now God assumes His proper role. Until this point, God remained silent, respecting the freedom of His creature. However, now that He has seen the movement of genuine good will and a proper disposition, He acts by means of His grace. Now He *runs forward and embraces us and kisses us and grants us* the true light and a radiant garment (cf. Lk 15:20)» (33).

13. Compare St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on Ecclesiastes 7.5*: «*There is a time to seek, and a time to lose* (Ecc 3:6). What should we be seeking? The Lord, as it is written: *Seek ye the Lord, and be strengthened; seek His face continually* (Ps 105:4); and again: *Seek ye the Lord, and when ye find Him, call upon Him* (Is 55:6). Thus we know what we should be seeking, and that the finding of it is itself a continuous seeking, for the seeking and the finding are not two different things» (GNO 5:400-401).

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ence this anguish demonstrates that what I seek for truly exists and indeed is already with me, actively working inside me. Why, then, should I seek anything other than this?

We have, then, an illumination that takes place within the intellect of the psalmist, who thereby begins to enter into the mind of God, into the depths of His spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:19). This change itself, this transformation of human thinking and judgment, this different way of seeing and interpreting things, is itself a *change of the right hand of the Most High*.<sup>14</sup>

Rendered more literally, this verse says: *This is the change of the right hand of the Most High*. This is a positive, «cataphatic» statement, the correct interpretation of which is best approached by asking: Is God susceptible of change? No.<sup>15</sup> And we must give

14. Compare St. Nikitas Stethatos, *On the Virtues* 61: «Sorrow prompted by God is an excellent tonic for those parts of the soul corrupted by evil actions, and it restores them to their natural state. It dissolves through tears the storm clouds of passion and sin and dispels them from the soul's spiritual firmament, so that at once a clear sky appears in the thoughts of our intellect, the sea of the mind grows calm, gladness rises in the heart and a change comes over our face. When this is seen by those skilled in discerning our inner state from our outward appearance, they will exclaim, as David did: *This change is from the right hand of God* (Ps 77:11)» (*Philokalia* 4:95); *ibid.*, 75: «If you'ree from this world, then light will dawn for you, that is, tears will swiftly well up in you. You will experience the change brought about by *the hand of the Most High* (Ps 77:11)» (4:99); and Ss. Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos, *On the Hesychastic Life* 68: «We are not now speaking of the knowledge of God through creation, but of that perfect and subsisting illumination, such as that which the disciples befell in an ineffable manner at the Transfiguration, when they received that beautiful and truly blessed *change brought about by the right hand of the Most High* (Ps 77:11) (*Philokalia* [Gr] 4:262).

15. The elder's theological interpretation of this verse finds support in the changing names used for God in these verses. Has God changed? Has He

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the same negative response to all the other questions that poured forth from the psalmist's anguished heart: *Will the Lord spurn forever and no longer continue to be well pleased? Will He completely cut off His mercy? Has He brought an end to His word from generation to generation? Will God forget to be compassionate? Will He in His anger shut up His compassion?* God does not change, and I understand this now because the same God Who has manifested Himself to the world from the beginning of time, as He Himself promised He would, will also manifest Himself to me. His appearing is a changeless change, the manifestation of His eternal presence in the movement of time and history, the manifestation of the «One Who is, Who was, and Who is to come» (Rev 1:8). Thus both to you and to me God will come.

The Hebrew here is slightly different. The basic image is of course the same: the human person in anguish before God, but instead of saying «Now I have begun,» it says «This is my *weakness*, my *failing*, that the right hand of the Most High has changed.» Is it a weakness or a failing to ask questions? Is it a failing to ask – even if I don't really believe it's possible – whether or not God is susceptible of change? As we said, it is impossible for God to change – but how can I attribute this change to myself? How can I call these disasters down on my head? What has happened to me? I am lost.

grown angry? Has he forgotten His steadfast love? This question may be reflected in the shift to the name of God (*El*) used at this point, in contrast to names and attributes of God's graciousness, along with the subsequent attempt to synthesize God's wrath and loving affection in the name of the «Most High.» The divine title of the «Most High» is part of the ancient Jerusalem liturgical tradition, and is one of the names of God characteristic of the Asaph psalms.

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What is the right way to respond to this dilemma? We must always be mindful of the way in which the Most High works. Do not abandon your struggle, do not flee from your anguish, for this is where your life is. It is imperative that you see God. If you don't see God, it will be the greatest tragedy of your existence, compared to which your greatest success will be exposed as nothing but an empty failure. Yet, anyone who does see God, according to the Bible, will not live (Ex 33:20). How, then, does this mystery unfold within a person's life, in the life of someone caught in this anguish? Only by the activity of the *right hand of the Most High*, which arranges and orders everything to its proper end. *And I said, «Now I have begun: this change has been brought about by the right hand of the Most High!»* I can not stay here in this tragic situation. Instead, I will turn to God and delight in Him.

In so far as the psalmist's spirit has regained its tranquility, and he has ceased expressing himself in the form of agonized questions; in so far as he has understood something about God, he can now say:

12 *I remembered the works of the Lord,  
for I will remember Your wonders from the beginning.*

Now that I have you here with me, my God; now that I understand You better, I will remember and think about all that You have done. A moment ago he said: *I considered days of old, and I remembered the years of ages past and I meditated.* When I was mulling over the past, my mind became clouded and confused, and a handful of yesterdays weighed on my spirit like spans of endless ages. Now, however, *I will remember Your wonders from the beginning.* I will stay here and I will meditate on Your wonders, Your miracles, and see in them Your light and Your love.

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13 *And I will meditate on all Your works,  
and I shall ponder Your ways.*

What is the particular sense of «meditate» here? It means to enter into the meaning of something very deeply, to understand not simply the external form or appearance of the work, but to understand its informing spirit. In every fact, in every event, in every thing, I will behold Your presence, O God; I will understand the extent to which You have been active in my life, active in my history; the extent to which You were present in all things, absent from none, working to bring about salvation.

*And I shall ponder Your ways.* I will reflect on, I will think about, I will take joy in, I will find the meaning of my life in *Your ways*. What is the sense of «ways» here? The Greek word is much closer to the notion of «deeds,» and designates what a person does deliberately, with determination; it is that which expresses the primary focus and orientation of his life. Thus, when the psalmist says *I shall ponder Your ways*, it's as if he were saying to God: «Whatever You are going to be occupied with, that what I'm going to be occupied with too. Where You are, that's where I shall be found. I will follow you, My God, I will come to the place where You are.» And so this is the definitive response demonstrating the spiritual depth of Asaph and the meaning of his psalm. This is followed immediately by a revelation:

14 *O God, in the Holy [Place] is Your way.  
What god is great as our God?*

What does it mean that God's «way» is in the «Holy [Place]»? For one thing, it means that God's way is holy. The way of God is the way of holiness: this is the road that leads to God, for to place one-

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self on it is already to have embraced Him. We find God through virtuous living, through right thoughts and action, through a life rightly ordered to its end in God.

What does it mean that something is «holy»? What is «holiness»? It means to be set apart. Your way, O God, is different from all other ways, for it is something set apart from them. To find the way of God, we need a new mind, a new way of thinking, new eyes with which to see, for the eyes and the mind of the world cannot find it or understand it. God's way is the way of holiness, of sanctification; it is the way of the saints, and I must learn to see it differently, in a manner befitting its holiness. I must come to understand the uniqueness of God, that He is not like anything in the world. Another version of this verse says that *Your Way, O God, is in the Holy Place*, that is, in the Tent of Witness, in the Temple of Jerusalem. That is where God resides and walks about (cf. Ex 25:21; 2 Kg 6:17). Yet God's proper place is heaven, the heavenly Tabernacle, with its celestial altar, of which the earthly Tabernacle was but a physical imitation, an extension and expression of God's eternal altar in a particular place and time, and it was from here that God was pleased to appear and speak to His people (cf. Ex 29:42-44; Num 7:89; 3 Kg 8:6-11).

When the high priest or the prophet wished to encounter God, they had to go to the place where God was. But how beautifully he says it: *O God, in the Holy is Your way*. That is where You dwell, that is where You move about, that is where I shall find You. I see traces of You in the Holy Place, Your splendor fills the Temple, and so it is here where I come to encounter You. I looked for deeds and accomplishments; I was seeking for some concrete things that You might have done. I realized, however, that You are not objects and things. You speak, You move about, You Yourself can be seen concretely. The tokens and traces of You are everywhere.

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They fill the world and, like fresh tracks discovered on a path, they tell me that You are very near, indeed that You are present, that You are among us, in our very midst. And You are here, too, in the Temple, in the Tabernacle. This is an extraordinary revelation, for it is the revelation of the Church, of the mystery and miracle of the Church, and this is the answer that the psalm gives to every soul that seeks after God. God is in His Holy Place, in His Temple, in the Church, in the gathering of His people, in the coming together of the community, indeed in the very place where we chant this psalm and sing this verse with so much joy.

When looked at through the prism and in the light of the New Testament, we see that the Church is the Body of Christ, that we are members of the body of God made flesh (cf. Eph 5:30). To the extent that we live in God, we dwell in His holiness, and we do this when we remember that «One is Holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father.»<sup>16</sup> God lives in Christ, for «in Him dwells all the fullness of the divinity» (Col 2:9). God speaks through His eternal Word, has visited us in His Son, and is present in the gathering of the community, in the fullness of the Church. Your way, O God, is in and through Christ, for He is «the Way» (Jn 14:6). In the darkness of a distant age, before things were clear, the psalmist arrived at fullness of understanding.

We began with affliction. We witnessed the change of the right hand of the Most High, and now we have the dawning of the light, the revelation of the way to God, of the Way to the Father. Before God is always Christ and the Church, leading us to God, and in response we sing: *What god is great as our God? What other god could have worked such miracles? What other nation has been*

16. A short hymn from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, sung before the chanting of the communion hymn.

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brought so close to God, so that we behold Him walking about in our midst?

- 15 *You are the God Who works wonders;  
    You made known Your power among the peoples;*  
16 *You redeemed Your people with Your arm,  
    the sons of Jacob and Joseph.* selah

You are our God and You bring about wondrous things, You work miracles. God exists and is active in the life of His people, and this has also been a sign to the nations. The wondrous passing through the Red Sea sent tremors through the hearts of the surrounding nations (cf. Num 22:5-6; Josh 2:9-11), and they fled in retreat. When afterwards they learned that the powerful Egyptian armies were drowned in the depths of the sea, they were stunned and left speechless. This was how God *made known His power among the peoples.*

*You redeemed Your people with Your arm.* That is, You rescued by Your power the children *of Jacob and Joseph*, the people of Israel. The names «Jacob» and «Joseph» are often found together in Sacred Scripture. Jacob, because from him stem the twelve tribes, and Joseph, because he played such an important role in Egypt. Here we speak of particular events in the history of Israel, but we may readily –and wondrously– expand our frame of reference and call to mind all the other many occasions when God *made known His power among the peoples.*

- 17 *Waters saw You, O God;  
    waters saw You, and they were afraid,  
    and the depths were afraid,*



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- 18 *Great was the sound of the waters;  
the clouds gave forth a voice,  
for Your arrows passed through them;*
- 19 *The voice of Your thunder is in the whirling of the clouds;  
Your bolts of lightning illumined the earth;  
the earth shook and was set atremble.*

Here let us follow the historical events described by the psalmist and interpret them in light of the psalm as a whole, that is, consistent with the spirit of the psalmist. The psalmist takes a historical event and uses it to demonstrate the presence of God. He makes use of the works, the deeds, the activities, in order to draw out from them the reality of God Who acts.

*The waters saw You, O God, and they were afraid.* It was not Moses who struck the waters; it was not from him that they fled back in awe. Instead, it was You, O God, Who was present there, and Who tore in two the garment of the sea. The waters did not see Moses, but instead they saw You, for You were there, which is why they were afraid. That they «were afraid» means that they parted, exposing the seabed so that Israel might cross over to the other side.

*The depths were afraid.* The Greek word here is «abyss,» which in Scripture designates the gathering of all the waters, all water as such with its inconceivable depth. The abyss began to be parted, to be torn in two, from top to bottom (cf. Mt 27:51). It's a striking image, for as the invisible blow struck the surface of the abyss, rising walls of water began to gather on either side as the elements were filled with dread. A wave of panic, we might say, swept from one wave to the next, from one section of the water to another, as they struggled in fear to withdraw before the presence of God.

*Great was the sound of the waters.* This great movement of a

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huge body of water, a maelstrom cut in two by the power of God, filled the air with a great cry, with a «great swarm of cries,» according to the literal sense of the Greek. The waters fled trembling, not wishing to suffer anything worse. The psalmist gives us a beautiful personification of natural phenomenon in awe before the Creator.<sup>17</sup>

*The clouds gave forth a voice.* Every manifestation of God is accompanied by signs in heaven and on earth. The psalmist, as a poet, is not content to describe merely the reaction of the sea, and so he tells us what was taking place in the «waters above the sea,» that is, in the «firmament» (cf. Gen 1:6). Arched over the sea, the sky likewise began to fear, and the clouds cried out, one to another: God is descending!

The word «whirling» is interesting, since in addition to meaning something like a cyclone or a hurricane (or a «whirlwind»), it also points to the fact that heaven itself is circular, like a vast turning wheel.<sup>18</sup> Or it is the wheel of the chariot of God, the vehicle and means of His manifestation. Psalm 67:18 speaks directly of the «chariot of God.» Thus the sound of thunder bursting forth from the clouds is the sound made by the wheels of the divine chariot, a vehicle of flame and fire bearing the King of Glory (Ps 23:7-10).

17. Many modern commentators believe that vv. 17-20 were originally part of an independent hymn that the psalmist incorporated into his work, and this may shed light on their heightened poetical character, noted by Elder Aimilianos.

18. Compare Eusebios of Caesarea, *On Psalm 77*: «The wheel is a symbol of life, since in Ezekiel the *wheels within wheels* (Ezek 1:16; 10:2, 6, 13) symbolize the life of humankind, for the world is a kind of spherical wheel that moves round in a circular manner, and as such is like human life, which is forever in motion but going only in a circle» (PG 23:897C).

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*For Your arrows passed through them.* Bolts of lightning *passed through* the clouds, and as the heavens were filled with their light, the skies thundered with the sound of it, and thus *the voice of Your thunder is in the whirling of the clouds.* The thunder and lightning were accompanied by a great whirlwind, which stretched from the heights of heaven to the depth of the sea, so that all creation was shaken and swirling about at the presence of God. God did not simply rescue Israel at a difficult moment, but actively worked for his deliverance, stirring up all the elements of nature. That is, God Himself descended so that even inanimate nature could not fail to take note: how much more so those present and the neighboring tribes and nations?

*The earth shook and was set atremble.* From the heights of the heavens the message was conveyed to the earth, to the dry land and the sea, and not just in that one place but throughout the whole world.

At this point let us consider the psalmist's depiction of God. *You made known Your power among the peoples; You redeemed Your people with Your arm, the sons of Jacob and Joseph.* The psalmist's primary concern is God Himself. His aim is not to set before our eyes an image of creation in a state of agitation, but rather the glory of God, because this is what we truly long for. We are able to share in God's life precisely because of His glory. Without His Glory, which is the splendor and radiance of His person, of His essence, God would be wholly invisible and unapproachable.

20 *Your way is in the sea,  
and Your paths in many waters,  
and Your footprints shall not be known.*

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The event has concluded. Signs and traces of it remain. Perfect calm and peace reign in the waters, which have now settled back into their natural place. Even words exude calm. Gone are the striking, agitated expressions of the previous verses. The terrible presence of God seems to have receded, so that even the marks of it begin to appear distant. But the work of deliverance is done: God descended and brought salvation to His people.

*And Your footprints shall not be known.* When you've made plans to meet someone somewhere, you'll be waiting there when he arrives. Yet the path you took to get there, the traces of yourself that you left behind, will not be visible, *they shall not be known*. Yet you are there, fully present, in the place that you promised to be. Everyone knows that lasting footprints cannot be made in the water. Thus the meaning here is spiritual.<sup>19</sup> God appears. God is seen. God becomes visible. But He becomes visible and is seen in a manner beyond vision, and yet He is truly seen. The vision of God is an event of revelation that takes place internally, and it is a true revelation. It issues in the knowledge and understanding of something true. It is an illumination, a communion with God, that you cannot explain with words, or interpret with ideas and concepts. In the end, God remains completely untraceable, inscrutable, transcendent. What-

19. This passage is a poetic reinterpretation of the story told in Exodus 14. There, nothing is said of God's having entered the water of the Red Sea, although here He does, causing them to tremble and retreat. On the literal level, the returning masses of water have covered God's path through the sea, but for the psalmist this contains a clear theological shift to the notion of the hiddenness of God (which was implicit in v. 14.) The powerful, universal revelation of God has, at the same time, a concealed quality. Moses sees only God's back (Ex 33:23); Isaiah knows that God's way are far beyond those of human beings (Is 55:8-9); Paul, perhaps inspired by Psalm 77:20, likewise says that God's ways are «unsearchable» (Rom 11:3).

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ever you think you've grasped, whatever you think you've encompassed by your mind, you can be sure that God is far beyond it. Even his *footprints*, the signs and tokens and traces of Him, *shall not be known*, shall not be objects of knowledge for you to organize and control. God, my God, I am not able to understand How You work, how You are active among us, How You come to me. What I do know is that You are active, and that You live and move about within me. Just as You so palpably walked on the water, so too do I feel You walking in my heart. The result of this is great peace, tranquility, like the calm face of the sea.

21 *You guided Your people like sheep  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.*

You walked at the head of the people, who followed behind You *by the hand of Moses and Aaron*. That hand was in fact Your hand, for You guided Moses and Aaron, and through them the people. You were there, You were the One leading; Moses and Aaron simply appeared first among those who were behind You.

The change that we see here is tremendous. The experience described by the psalmist is something living, free, beyond explanation, filled with enthusiasm, ecstatic, requiring no further words or comments. The revelation is complete. God has descended. The invisible God has been seen in a manner beyond vision. God is active, but this is not something I can understand. He led Moses, He led the people: will He lead me? The psalmist has no need to ask such a question, for the answer has already been given in his experience of God's joy and peace.<sup>20</sup> In the beginning he cried out:

20. The «open ending» of Psalm 77 has attracted the attention of many commentators, ancient and modern. Whereas vs. 11 draws a balance at the end

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*With my voice I cried to the Lord, with my voice to God; in the day of my affliction I sought God.* But now he does not say: «I found God,» or draw some other kind of conclusion, but simply says: *You guided Your people like sheep by the hand of Moses and Aaron.* This is why he says: «I am at peace, I am at rest, my soul is calm. This is because You are guiding me.» Gone are all his doubts, his fears, his anguish, his anxiety. He is now in the flock that is led by God. He is exactly where God is.

of the lament section, we have no analogous summary after the recollection of God's wonderful deeds. The remembrance itself is not applied to the present of the psalmist or to his situation of need, who, as the elder points out, draws no conclusion from what has been described. As the elder suggests, the «conclusion» is to found in a life with God, which, like God Himself, remains hidden, like footsteps in the sea.

## ABBREVIATIONS

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## WORKS CITED

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